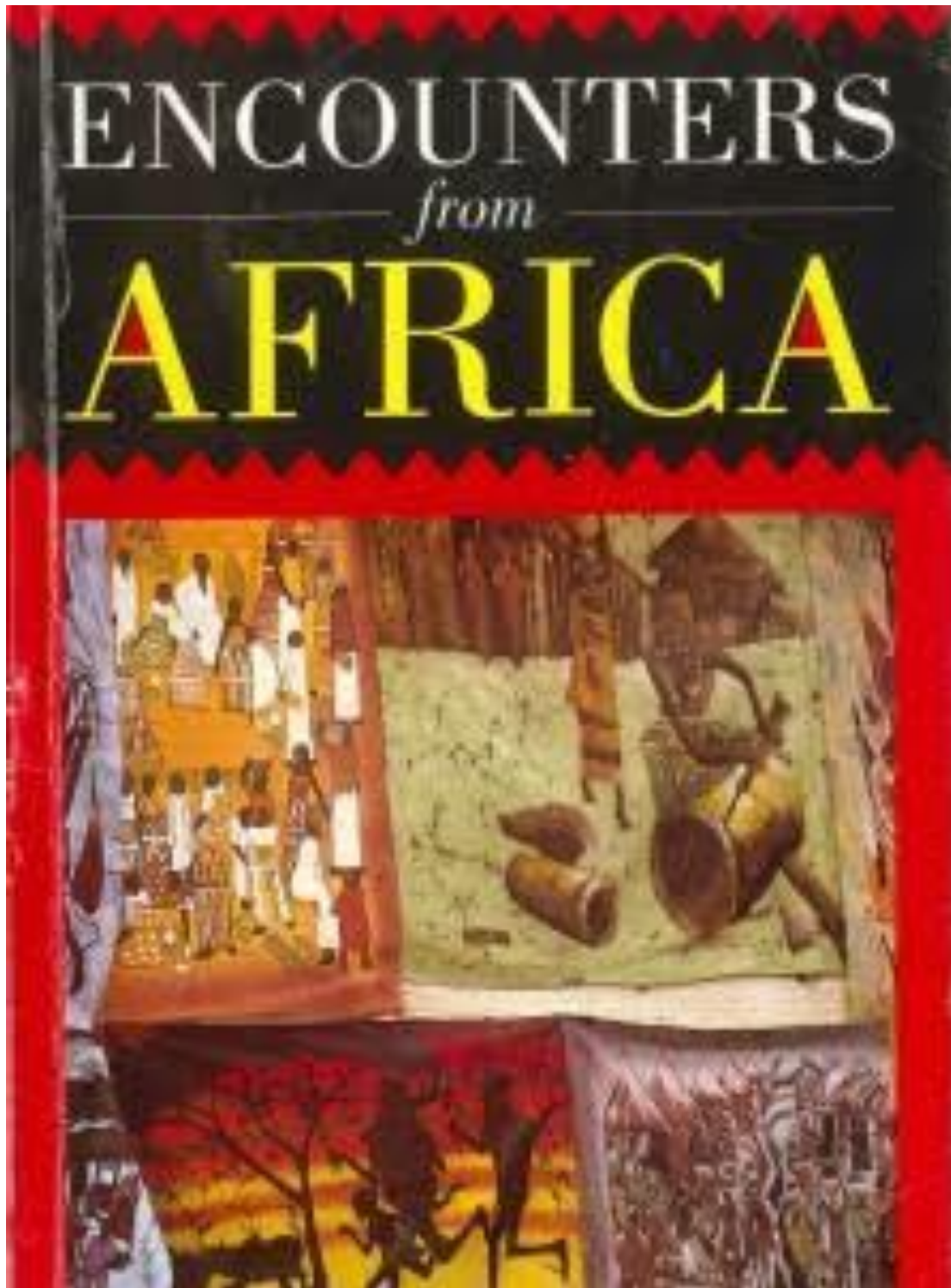


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Acknowledgements

The publishers wish to thank the following for permission to use copyright material:
David Bolt Associates on behalf of the author for Chinua Achebe, 'The Voter' from *Pan African Short Stories*, ed. Neville Denny (1965) Nelson;
East African Educational Publishers Ltd for Grace Ogot, 'Tekayo' from *Land Without Thunder* by Grace Ogot (1993); and Barbara Kimenye, 'The Bewitching of Damieno' from *Kalasanda* by Barbara Kimenye (1993);
Les Editions Hatier for E B Dongala, 'The Man' in *Jazz and Palm Wine*, trans. Clive Wake, collection *Monde Noir Poche* (1982). Copyright © Hatier, Paris;
Heinemann Educational Publishers, a division of Reed Educational & Professional Publishing Ltd, for G Sobott-Mogwe, 'Smile of Fortune' from *Colour Me Blue*, Heinemann African Writers Series (1995);
John Johnson (Authors' Agent) Ltd on behalf of the author for Bessie Head, 'The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses' from *Tales of Tenderness and Power* by Bessie Head, Heinemann (1990);
Sam Kahiga for 'The Last Breath' from *Potent Ash* by Sam Kahiga and Leonard Kibera, East African Publishing House.
Tijan M Sallah for 'Innocent Terror' from *Before the New Earth* by Tijan M Sallah, Writers Workshop, Calcutta (1988);
A P Watt Ltd on behalf of the author for Luis Bernardo Honwana, 'Papa, Snake & I' from *We Killed Mangy Dog and Other Stories* by Luis Bernardo Honwana, Heinemann (1969); and on behalf of Felix Licensing BV for Nadine Gordimer, 'Amnesty' from *Jump and Other Stories* by Nadine Gordimer, Penguin (1992);
Westwood Creative Artists Ltd on behalf of Ken Wiwa for Ken Saro-Wiwa, 'Africa Kills Her Sun' from *Adaku and Other Stories* by Ken Saro-Wiwa (1989). Copyright © Estate of Ken Saro-Wiwa;

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Introduction

Oral and written traditions

Since the beginning of time, people have made sense of the world by telling stories. Storytelling has been the way to shape experience, give it a meaning, explain and record events. Around fires, cooking pots and tables, communities have gathered for centuries to keep alive the collective memories, legends, myths and heroic adventures of their people.

The storyteller's calling was a sacred art – the power of narrating was closely linked to magic. Stories were sung or acted out, or recited to the accompaniment of music or drumming. The storyteller was a highly skilled person – he had to entertain his audience, keep their attention, create suspense, as well as preserve tradition and weave a magic spell. The relation of narrator to his audience was of prime importance.

When stories were written down for the first time they became hardened into a set form. The speaker (narrator) and audience disappeared, becoming author and reader, and the written text became the focus. The whole drama of storytelling became the solitary, (often) silent act of one individual. The epic – the long poetic form about the adventures of a hero – stiffened into prose, later the novel, while songs, ballads and rhymes accompanied by music and drums, became what we now call poetry. In cultures where writing appeared later, the oral tradition still flavours the written word: the storyteller is still alive and the audience still a communal ear. In Africa particularly, literature is an exciting and ever-changing discipline. Many writers try to keep an oral flavour in their writing. Instead of imitating a 'Western' style, they retain some elements of African traditions of narration. As readers, then, we are asked not simply to read, analyse and critique the stories but to respect the sacred calling of the ancient storyteller, to listen and participate in the act of storytelling.

The short story

The short story was a late developer in literature. By the thirteenth century, drama and poetry had established themselves as recognisable forms. The novel became possible with the development of the printing

press, and became a popular form in the eighteenth century. But the short story only began to appear in the early nineteenth century. In Europe the Russian writers Chekhov and Tolstoy began writing and publishing well-structured short tales. In North America, Edgar Allen Poe published his *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, calling them a new 'form' of literature. Poe claimed that, unlike a novel, the short story was a narrative that could be read 'at one sitting'. He also argued that the short story had a 'unity of purpose' the novel didn't have – it had to create a 'single effect'. It had to be efficient and economic in words and plot, using few characters and focusing on one single event to make its point.

Contrary to what we might expect, the short story is considered to be the most difficult genre to write, because of the concentration and condensation needed. Everything – every word, detail, character – must have purpose and work to a final end. Whereas a novel can wander through many scenes, characters, sub-plots, resolutions and conflicts, the short story must be to the point: one conflict, one climax, one resolution.

The short story in Africa

In spite of the difficulty in writing the short story, it has become the most popular form of literature in Africa today. There are many reasons for this:

♦ Brevity

The idea of reading a story 'at one sitting' makes the short story most suited to readers whose leisure time is limited. Some readers who only have short snatches of time to read, on the way to and from work, prefer poetry and short stories that are to the point, immediately accessible, and concentrated. Many African writers are journalists, trained to make their point effectively and quickly, so the short story genre appeals to them, too. Practically speaking, the short story can also find a publisher more easily than a novel because of its brevity. There are many places a short story can be published – a newspaper, magazine, journal – without a great deal of expense.

♦ Subject matter

It has been argued that the short story is the best way to present short 'snapshots' of real life. Writers often talk of writing short stories that portray 'Life as it is'. Often too, there is a political point to be made. Politics move quickly, and a novel written to protest about some contemporary issue quickly becomes outdated, sometimes before it is even published. In apartheid South Africa in the 1950s, authors writing for the *Drum*¹ realised this, and developed the short story genre into a fast, accessible form of protest. (Ezekiel Mphahlele, one of the founders of the *Drum* school, has a

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story in this collection which was written at that time, and uses the short story to give a realistic span of a man's life in only a few short pages.)

• Oral Tradition

Many people think that the short story is the ideal medium for the oral tradition. The short story resembles an oral tale in that it has to be read (heard) in one sitting, and the storyteller must hold the attention of the audience for the duration of the entire story. African writers have often chosen the short story to communicate and express an oral style. Even writers who are primarily novelists use the short story as their apprenticeship into the craft of writing. The short story, even if not easier to write, has been easier to publish and easier to read than a novel, and has grown into an exciting art form.

Narrative techniques

African short stories are often written as if they are meant to be read out loud and listened to. Sometimes the writer achieves this effect by blending an oral style of narrative into the written form, in imitation of the storyteller speaking to his audience. More often, though, the writer simply makes the form of the short story fit his or her African style and 'voice'. In some of the stories in this collection, the author works on the sound of language through the voice of the narrator. When we read the story, we can almost hear the tone of the narrator's voice and see the expression on his or her face as he or she tells us the story. In 'Innocent terror', for example, the narrator breaks into his native tongue (Wolof) every now and then to express the shock of the situation and to speak directly to us, the audience: 'Chei! How could such innocent terror have evaded the responsibilities of a mutually human-regarding society?'

• Third person – omniscient narrator (he or she)

This is the most common way of telling stories – the narrator is the storyteller who sits outside the characters' lives and can see into their thoughts and actions from beginning to end. The narrator of 'Ajaiyi and the witch doctor', for example, can tell us that the witchdoctor is cheating and stealing the poor man's sheep, but Ajaiyi himself can't know this.

'The Bewitching of Damieno' tells the story of a community from different points of view. We see first how the widow sees, then how the new chief interprets the situation, then how the rest of the community sees it. Finally, we can put together a picture of the whole situation.

• First person – the 'I' narrator

Here the narrator is another character in the story, an observer who is also involved in the action. He or she may be *intrusive* (telling us what they

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think), and most probably *limited* (the narrator will not always know other characters' thoughts or actions unless he or she is there at the time). 'The last breath', 'Amnesty', 'A handful of dates' and 'Papa, snake and I' are examples of this type of limited first person narrator. The narrators tell us of their personal experiences, but are often ignorant of other actions and characters' motives and thoughts. The man who is intent on marrying the blind girl in 'The last breath' does not know his father's real intentions about their marriage until the end. Both 'Papa, snake and I' and 'A handful of dates' look at the world from the point of view of a young boy who does not fully understand the ways of the world – until the end. We as readers can only see through the narrator's limited viewpoint.

The advantage of this point of view is that we can experience how it feels to live in the character's private world. 'Amnesty' gives us the very real experience of South Africa at an exciting time of its history – the release of Nelson Mandela, the planning of the new government – yet we see only through the eyes of a simple country girl who is not really aware of everything that is going on. So what is the point of having such a limited viewpoint? In 'Amnesty' we have an unusual voice, one that is usually neglected – and the author's point is that those women left behind while their men are fighting for their country also have a story to tell. Sometimes the advantage of this type of story is that we as readers see *more* than the narrator. We see, for example, that the girl is being taken advantage of and neglected, even though she thinks otherwise. In 'A handful of dates' we see that the boy is being lied to by his grandfather; in 'Papa, snake and I', the boy does not really recognise his desire for Sartina or understand the oppression that occurs in his family.

Another form of the first person narrative is the letter, or epistolary narrative. 'Africa kills her sun' is a letter from Bana to his girlfriend Zole. The narrator is not telling a story to us, but expressing his personal feelings to a friend. Yet we as readers participate in the story he tells, and it is even more moving to 'eavesdrop' on his last confession.

Themes

Traditionally African writers have dealt with the social and political clashes in society: between coloniser and colonised, tradition and modernity, urban and rural, the position of women, etc. In all these examples, and in the anthology itself, the overriding theme is *the struggle to survive in modern Africa*. The ordinary person has to struggle against poverty, exploitation, corrupt governments, racism and sexism, in order to survive. Mphahlele's story sums up the common theme: 'Man must live'.

♦ Witchcraft

In this collection, two different views are given on the subject, both acknowledging the reality of witchcraft in people's lives. In 'The bewitch-

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ing of Damieno' the chief does not believe in its power but has to deal with a community that does. In 'Ajaiyi and the witch doctor' the author is exposing a crooked man who uses his profession to exploit and terrorise people, but is finally exposed as a fraud.

* Corrupt political regimes

Included in this anthology is a story by a writer who paid with his life for his protest against a corrupt political regime. 'Africa kills her sun' tells of the plight of an ordinary man who cannot live normally in his society because of the oppression of his government. Similarly, Dongala's story, 'The man', shows how any resistance to the power of an oppressive regime is ruthlessly eradicated. 'Innocent terror' shows how justice is perverted by elite groups aligned to corrupt government groups. The above stories reveal the terror and horror of life under such oppression. They shock us into sympathetic protest against such exploitation, and the writers of such stories aim to expose injustice through their writing. 'The voter', on the other hand, uses different tactics to expose a corrupt government – by farce and parody. We are made to laugh at the antics of the 'voter' and the political parties he 'represents', and are entertained by the story. The writer's intention, however, is not simply to entertain or amuse, but to criticise the way democracy has been abused and diverted in the self interests of the new elite.

Three of the stories in this collection are set in or around a prison – 'Amnesty', 'The prisoner who wore glasses' and 'Africa kills her sun'. Bessie Head's 'The prisoner who wore glasses' is set in the apartheid regime of South Africa, and is implicitly criticising that racist regime. But unlike other protest stories of her time, Bessie Head offers a gleam of hope. Her focus is not on the system, but on the way humans of different races in exceptional circumstances can resolve their differences. 'Amnesty' focuses on the release of all political prisoners from Robben Island prison. Not so positive is Ken Saro-Wiwa's tale set in prison. Here, there is no escape but death for critics of the regime.

* Women in society

It is refreshing to see that more and more women's voices are being heard in African literature, and that the subject of their stories deals with the central issue of women in society. Nadine Gordimer's story 'Amnesty' (as mentioned before) looks at the world from a woman's point of view. While men are fighting, what happens to the women who stay behind to look after the children? 'Smile of fortune' looks at first like the story of a man's control and exploitation of women for his own greedy purposes, yet the true story is found in the enigma of his wife's 'Mona Lisa' smile. Both Grace Ogot and Barbara Kimenye write stories that, though not tackling women's issues directly, place women on centre stage.

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♦ Family relationships

Two 'coming-of-age' stories give us a picture of the traditional family in two widely distant places on the continent – 'A handful of dates' from Sudan and 'Papa, snake and I' from Mozambique. It is interesting to see how similar the young narrator's realisation is in each. Both narrators are disturbed by the sense that things are not as they should be. In 'Tekayo', we see the disintegration of family life – this time because of the transgression of a taboo. All three stories concern themselves with children and their sanctity. We trust a child's perspective, though it may be limited, because he or she is untainted by the corruption that seems to come inevitably with adulthood. In Mphahlele's 'Man must live', for example, we see a man struggling to survive and justifying his methods of survival in ways that are not always honest. His plight, though, is real – he has no home, family or community in the South Africa he lives in, and has to resort to any way possible in order to survive. Family relationships are also disrupted by a social/political system in 'Africa kills her sun' where a man is cut off from society, family and girlfriend because of the merciless political regime. His only protest is to die alone. Similarly, 'Amnesty' is the story of a broken family caused by the political upheavals of the times in which we live. By contrast, 'The last breath' tells the story of a family knitting together and bonding in spite of the social stigma attached to blindness.



The stories that follow have deliberately been selected to represent a wide variety of themes, styles, interests, times and places. There is a cross section of women and men writers, geographically spanning north, east, west and southern Africa; they range from stories written in the early 1950s to contemporary stories in the late 1990s, stories written by famous, prize-winning authors to new, unknown writers; they reflect a broad range of languages and cultures; there are translations from French, Arabic and Portuguese; a range of English styles from formal and complex to simple and colloquial; stories are set in both rural and urban communities, and deal with traditional and modern themes.

This collection is also a tribute to African writers who have the courage to face censorship, exile, and even death to express themselves and to make important concerns public. African writers also have to fight battles of illiteracy, poor distribution of material and lack of funding for publication. As readers and critics, we have a responsibility to encourage African literature to grow and flourish in these exciting times. We hope that the stories which follow will 'whet your appetite', will tempt you to read more literature, and may even encourage you to write yourself. Enjoy them!

Introduction

NOTES

- 1 *Drum* is a popular weekly black magazine which publishes short fiction and poetry along with other features.

Gaele Sobott-Mogwe

Smile of fortune

GAELE SOBOTT-MOGWE was born in Australia in 1956. She emigrated to Botswana in 1978, where she became a citizen. Her love for African literature prompted her to study African authors, particularly local women writers. She went on to become a lecturer in the English Department of the University of Botswana.

Gaele's own stories explore everyday life in Southern Africa. 'I am usually, not always, motivated to write by experiencing or hearing of an injustice of some sort,' she says. The story that follows - *Smile of fortune* - is taken from her first short-story collection in 1955, *Colour Me Blue*, and looks at the position of women in society.

Gaele is also well known for her children's books. She was motivated to write for children because of the lack of books available that reflected an African context and way of thinking, as most children's literature was still written from the point of view of English culture and knowledge. So Gaele began writing books set in Botswana, seen from the point of view of African children. Her efforts were rewarded when she won the *Zimbabwe Literary Award for Children's Literature* in 1993.

Gaele Sobott-Mogwe is the mother of three children, Kagiso, Lorato and Thara. She is now in England working on a Ph.D on twentieth century black South African women writers.

His parents had long passed away. Khumo had friends in high places who made sure he qualified in England. They arranged the scholarship and he came home with an MSc. in Economics. He was a happy, friendly type. Always willing to please. If he did disagree with the opinions of his superiors or elders, he never showed his opposition. He would politely murmur or loudly voice his agreement with the view-points of those who mattered. He laughed boisterously at their jokes and dressed for the occasion. Dinner parties, cocktails, roof wettings, turning the sod, sports and

Smile of fortune

charity events – he could be seen, a beer in hand, chatting to the right people, smiling amicably.

He married the daughter of a wealthy farmer, an established family. His friends in high places suggested the match. Khumo didn't mind. She was beautiful, quiet, suitably subservient, sweet – his idea of an ideal wife. The wedding was all that could be expected of a society affair. The yellow and white striped marquees stood fresh and crisp against the manicured green of the lawns. Children, dressed as miniature adults, pastel frills, high-heeled patent leather shoes and three-piece suits, wove excited patterns through the guests. The guests, all relieved to have received their gold embossed invitation cards, exchanged niceties and switched on standard facial expressions. Their senses worked with keen simultaneity through strained ears and corners of eyes, sieving vital tidbits peripheral to their conversations. Fiercely fashion-conscious, money-conscious appraisals were hidden behind polite geniality. Who was talking to whom? Saving what? Matching hats and shoes competed with the colourful extravagance of expensive dresses, lavish hairstyles, suits and ties.

Men congregated around the bar. Some people filed past the VIP tent, bending respectfully, silently clapping their hands in greeting. Aunts, uncles, first, second and third cousins giggled, gossiped and worked to make the day a success. They had slaughtered beasts, prepared food and made ginger beer. Some took the wedding presents and put them in a safe place. The array of duties stretched into exhausting infinity.

Six white Mercedes carried the wedding party to and from the church. The bride and groom looked cheerfully self-conscious as their arrival at the house was announced by loud ululations. The guests rallied around the beaming couple and their entourage of bridesmaids and attendants. They took a closer look at the bride's dress, the fine satin, the trillions of sequins hand-sewn into flower shapes and the lace. Women began to ululate again and dance. Some stooped, pretending to sweep the path. Some carried straw brooms. Men and children joined the women. Bodies swung and shook to the songs, to the joyous beat of stamping feet and clapping, as the procession meandered around the yard, through the trees, tables and chairs to the main table where the bride and groom finally sat down.

One by one the guests approached the couple, shaking their hands, kissing them, whispering, joking and congratulating them. Queues of people wound their way towards the long food tables. They helped themselves to large portions of *seswaa*,¹ chicken curry, *bogobe*,² *samp*³ and salads. Women wearing aprons ran from table to table carrying champagne and clearing away the empty glasses and dirty plates.

Khumo kept a picture of his wife on his office desk. He studied her smooth, dark brown skin. Her shiny, black hair was pulled back into a

tight knot. Her mouth turned up cheekily on one side in a secret, Mona Lisa half smile. He tried to remember who had taken the photo. It wasn't him. He didn't know one end of a camera from the other. He had never loved her. He had collected her in the same way he collected cars and houses. She was a status symbol, an organiser, a hostess. She should have been a mother. The mother of his children. The mother of his son. They had been married six years now and he resented the fact that she hadn't produced an heir. He ran his finger over the grain of his antique oak desk. The secretary interrupted his thoughts.

'I'm sorry, Sir, but Mr Smith is here to see you.'

Khumo felt a little annoyed that Mr Smith hadn't bothered to make an appointment.

'Give me five minutes, then show him in,' he said brusquely and breathed in the movement of the secretary's plumpish buttocks as she walked towards the door. His personal assistant was on maternity leave. She would have put Mr Smith in his place. She was expecting Khumo's child. He paid. He always did. He looked after his children financially and kept their mothers happy. It was tidier that way. Mr Smith was here about the tannery project. He checked through the list of contenders. Smith's company didn't qualify. He would probably put it to the board next week.

The secretary escorted the grey-haired, slightly balding Englishman into the room. Khumo rose from his seat to shake the limp hand that was offered to him. His eyes slipped down the secretary's skirt to the soft, inside thigh that showed just above her knees and quickly back to Mr Smith who was apologising for not having made an appointment. The Englishman lisped as he spoke.

'Actually, thith ith jutht a courtethy call and I would like to take the opportunity to invite you and your lovely wife out for dinner thith evening, that ith, if you are free.'

Khumo stood up and walked slowly to the window. He studied the view for a moment, his hands in his pockets and his back to Mr Smith.

'Yes, dinner would be nice.'

Mr Smith jumped up from his seat. 'Good, good, shall we thay theven at the Peacock Lounge?'

They shook hands again and the Englishman left.

Sitting in his leather chair, Khumo spun round slowly, looking at the ceiling. The phone rang. It was his politician friend.

'Listen, I want to talk to you about United. I think they're the best people for the job. I'll see you at five at home.'

Khumo fiddled with the telephone cord. Obviously Smith's company had more going for it than he had been able to assess. It did not have a good reputation for keeping to schedules and it was the most expensive. It would be one of those deals. Khumo smiled. His friend the politician filled him in. There was nothing more to be said. It wouldn't go to the board after all. Not this time.

Khumo argued with his wife that evening. She said she didn't feel well. That was another thing that frustrated him lately. She was always finding reasons not to accompany him to dinners and parties. He sat through the dinner with Mr Smith who talked about his days in the British Army in Kenya and the 'Mau Mau'. He claimed to have spent most of his life in Africa and to identify with the continent more than he did with his own Britain. He placed his thin hands on the white tablecloth and said in a whiny voice, 'But between you and me thingth have really gone to the dogth.'

Khumo smiled and nodded. He thought of the holiday he had been offered in London. He might just take that secretary along. He thought of his percentage.

One per cent of total contract price amounted to a lot of money. He had collected on some hefty projects. That was after his friends had taken their share. It was a network of influence. It wouldn't work without trust and reward. It was still a lot of money. He had to put it somewhere. Do something with it. The excitement of holidays had long worn thin. He had to spend some time in the office. Wine and women, shopping, nightclubs were fine in small doses. He wanted property. Solid assets. He bought more houses, land. State of the art stereo equipment, television sets, furniture for the mothers of his children, for his women. Swimming pools, BMWs and a Range Rover. Life was good. He put money in foreign bank accounts, started up new companies and bought houses in his wife's name. What did she know? She just signed obediently on the dotted line. She had to be good for something. She was obviously incapable of continuing his family line. He had been through the pros and cons of divorce with his lawyers. It was still a possibility.

His wife was in bed asleep when he got home. He poured a whisky, put a jazz fusion CD in the system and lay on the couch. He thought of the secretary. It would probably be the first time she had travelled overseas. The dogs started barking. He ignored them. The front gate bell rang. He didn't move, hoping whoever it was would just go away. The bell rang again. He swore. The bell rang for the third time.

'All right, all right, I'm coming. I'm coming,' he muttered.

Three of his friends were at the gate. These were men who had helped him in life. His friends in high places. Police, army, politics, the church. He had friends where it mattered. It was a network and a good one. He poured them drinks. They asked how his wife was and discussed the weather. They jokingly remarked that he was putting on weight.

'Life must be treating you well, Khumo. You've got a public opinion.'

Khumo laughed and patted his stomach proudly. 'I'm playing squash these days, gents. Trying to keep fit.'

The politician stood near the fireplace and fiddled with the ornaments on the mantelpiece.

'Talking of public opinion, Khumo, there's a problem.'

Smile of fortune

Khumo waited. His friend the policeman continued. 'It's the journalists. Some bleeding heart, do-gooder journalist has got hold of the Intercity Consultants story. It will be out in tomorrow's newspapers. They don't know much but they know enough. We've got to have a fall guy. A kind of red herring that will divert the whole thing. You know we can't afford an investigation.'

Khumo remained silent, a powerful sense of dread growing within him. They explained the principle of the domino effect to him. They didn't want the main players unmasked. They didn't want the other deals exposed. There was that recently signed contract worth millions to all of them. They could not afford protracted public scrutiny, not at this point. The politician patted him on the back.

'I know you won't allow that to happen, will you, brother?'

Khumo tried to smile. He didn't want to take the rap. He had to find a way out. They promised him money. They talked of sacrifice. How it was a vital component of life. How sacrifices were made to the ancestors to ensure that families now living on earth received protection, bountiful harvests, good rains. The healthier those on earth, the more children there would be. The larger and happier the population, the more the living would worship those who had passed before them and eventually when it came to dying, add to the ancestor pool. It was a replenishing, reciprocating and everlasting circle. Khumo suddenly saw himself as a tiny thread in an invisible, suffocating web. He had to shoulder the blame, absorb and deflect the heat. He had to sacrifice. He had to be the sacrifice.

They left. Khumo locked the gate, went back inside and slumped on to the couch. He couldn't do it. Almost a year had gone by since he had awarded Intercity Consultants the pipeline. He had put it before the board and as Intercity was the cheapest, it hadn't been difficult to convince them. Their price was low. Everybody was happy. Nobody suspected anything. The network had siphoned off millions in false claims over and above the original price. It wasn't the consultants' fault that the contractors didn't turn up on time. It was only fair that the company charge standby time and that the client pay.

Then there were the extensions. What was initially a thirty million job ended up at sixty million. It was Khumo who approved the claims and the requests for extensions. It was a lucrative set-up. He sighed. He was in a right spot. He wondered how much the journalists knew. Surely they couldn't have traced the link between the consultants and the contractors?

There was something else bothering him. It had been nagging him the whole day but he hadn't been able to put his finger on it. That South African company. The one he had given the infrastructure contract to. They had paid him handsomely. Now they wanted the northern road job. They were insistent. He wasn't sure if he could swing it. One of the directors had phoned him that morning. He reflected for a while over what the man had said. He hadn't realised it at the time but it was clear now

that he had been issued with a subtle threat. He held his head in his hands, thinking, looking for a way out. It was too much. He was scared.

Sun was streaming in through the window when he woke. His neck was stiff. He had fallen asleep in an awkward position. Fear ate at his being like some kind of persistent hangover. There was a note in the kitchen from his wife. She had gone to her parents for the weekend. The dogs barked and the front gate bell rang. He stumbled out. His friends were already in the yard.

'You look terrible, Khumo man,' the politician laughed. 'What did you get up to after we left last night?'

His squash partner was with them.

'Remember you promised me a game this weekend.'

Khumo couldn't remember but went and changed into his track suit all the same. They played squash and had a few drinks at the clubhouse. They showered and changed, finished the beers in Khumo's refrigerator and drove to a wedding just out of town.

The wedding was just what he needed. The secretary was there. He danced with her, pulling her close for the slow songs. She didn't seem to mind. It was three o'clock in the morning. His friends persuaded him to go home. The secretary had already left. Khumo got into his car. He felt alone. The monotony of the road encouraged him to increase his speed. The headlights flickered through the dry grass and illuminated the occasional thorn tree that fringed the road. There were two ghostly donkeys grazing. Dangerous these beasts. He had to keep an eye out for them.

A car pulled out in front of him. He almost welcomed the relief this brought to his loneliness. If he sat behind this car he wouldn't have to concentrate so hard. Let someone else look out for cattle. He laughed to himself. Blinding lights penetrated the muscles behind his eyes. His reflexes reacted, knocking the offending rear-view mirror into crooked submission.

The car in front was slow. Too slow. It rose from the road like some ominous, hunchbacked animal. He slammed his foot down on the brake. His neck snapped forward. His head hurtled towards the windscreen. Grinding teeth gnashed the back of his vehicle. He tried to straighten his neck. He tried to accelerate. The engine roared with pain, caught in the vice-like grip of two metallic maniacs. They let up for a while and then pounced with renewed fury. The car behind began to overtake. It bashed into the side of his car. Again. Again. Again. Pulverising, grating. He howled in terror. Searing, tearing, hot spasms ripped through his shoulder as he lost control. Thick, white iridescent rails loomed ahead. Noise. So much harsh, jarring noise. The car was rolling. It felt like eight or ten times. He tasted sand and blood. Grit coated his hair and skin. He crawled. Dragging himself over shattered glass like a newborn puppy. Twitching. Heavy footsteps registered somewhere in his conscious mind. The cold steel barrel sucked in his taut temple and released it in a brutal explosion.

Smile of fortune

'Ya, my brother,' the knife bent over his already lifeless throat. You couldn't resist. 'This is the last time you will smile.' They were laughing as they drove off.

It was an accident, they said. A tragic accident. He was driving home late at night and lost control. He had been drinking. Some suggested suicide. There was that scandal in the newspapers. They went to prayers at his house. They went to the vigil and burial. They paid for a magnificent, ornate coffin. His wife behaved in the dignified manner expected of her. No vulgar public displays of grief at the funeral, her face hidden behind dark sunglasses and a veil.

She bore her widowhood bravely, mourning the full year, celibate, attired in traditional black. Her aunts and other female relatives were there at the end of the one-year term, by her side for the ritual discarding of the black clothing. They admired her strength and composure.

There was no one with her when she went to the doctor to have the small, copper tee removed from the mouth of her womb. It didn't hurt. She booked first class for her trip overseas. She carried a briefcase full of documents with her signature on them. As the plane took off she smiled, a secret, Mona Lisa half smile.

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

• Revision questions

- 1 a) What opinion do you form of Khumo after reading the first paragraph?
- b) Do you hold the same opinion of him up to the end of the story?
- 2 What kind of things do Khumo and his friends seem to value most?
- 3 Describe the relationship between Khumo and his wife.
- 4 Discuss the theme of corruption as portrayed through Khumo and his friends.
- 5 What is meant by 'a red herring'? Why did Khumo and his friends need a red herring?
- 6 Why do you think the leakage of information on the Intercity deal seems to affect Khumo more than it affects his friends?
- 7 Gather information from the story on the awarding of a tender to Intercity Consultants and, using the information, explain how a tender is awarded.
- 8 Pick out the details that show Khumo was drunk as he drove home after attending a wedding.
- 9 What actually happened to Khumo that brought about his death?
- 10 Who do you think killed Khumo and why?
- 11 The story is full of suspense and the reader has to make his/her own conclusions. Identify and explain incidents in the story where you have to make your own conclusions.

Sam Kahiga

The last breath

SAM KAHIGA was born in the village of Uthiru in Kenya in 1946. After studying Fine Art and Design at Nairobi University College, he worked for the Voice of Kenya (now Kenya Broadcasting Corporation), where he made his name as a documentary film maker. But 1979, he resigned to become a full-time writer, publishing popular newspaper columns, short stories and novels. His stories and one of his books have been translated into German, Japanese and Swedish. His radio plays have been broadcast in Czechoslovakia, Germany and on the BBC.

Sam Kahiga grew up in the fifties when there were not many books for a young child to read. Nevertheless, the written word had a magic appeal to him, and he can still remember walking miles over the hills just to borrow a tattered book from a friend. He began writing stories for his class-mates while still in primary school, on discovering that they enjoyed reading them, he vowed to become a writer.

His dreams were realised. Sam was among the first ten Kenyans to be published after independence. His travels as a film maker to places like Mauritius, Sudan, Yugoslavia, Britain and the USA have inspired many of his stories, offering him a chance to study life in many different kinds of environments. In his own words, Sam's commitment to write comes from the idea that since only the writer knows his story, it is his business to write it. There are millions of stories in Africa still unwritten, so few writers to tell them.

We watched Eva walking firmly back to her dormitory. I glanced sideways at Dad. He was watching her with a strange, tense look in his eye.

I hesitate on the word 'tense', doubtful as to whether Dad was ever

tense in his life. But the look in his eye was very strange as he watched her walk away.

I wondered what he was thinking. Whatever it was it made no difference. I loved Eva and would marry her as soon as I possibly could.

Suddenly, without a word Dad started the engine and drove furiously down the road towards the gate of the blind school.

'What will you do? You can't marry her like that!' he shouted above the roar of the engine.

I looked at him swiftly. His eyes were steady on the road. Anger flooded through me. So the visit had been in vain. So he had seen nothing of the Inner Eva.

'We've gone through all this before,' I said. 'Now you have seen her. My last word on the subject is this. When I come of age next August I am going to ask Eva to marry me.'

'But she is blind...!'

I sank back in my seat. This was hopeless. For how long would Dad keep on beating home the fact? As if it wasn't home already – and what was more, accepted!

'Then give her eyes.' My voice was hoarse with anger.

A look of surprise momentarily came to Dad's face. Then he looked grim. Though he didn't seem to realise it he increased his speed. I thought I knew what had got hold of Dad, and the thought brought a faint smile on to my lips.

Dad was confused and angry with himself for it. He had until now thought of Eva as a blind, helpless creature who had stolen my heart. Now he had seen her and perhaps caught a glimpse of the angel in her – and had even seen, perhaps, how very far from helpless Eva was.

'What are you going to do?' I asked in a shout, for now the mad roar of the car would have drowned anything less.

Dad didn't reply. A terrible cough shook his frame and the car swerved dangerously to the edge of the road.

He corrected this (just in time too!) and settled comfortably in his seat.

Neither of us talked again till we got back home. I left the car silently and entered the house. I went to my room and sank on to my bed with a sigh.

I wondered bitterly when my father would start to understand me and my feelings.

It seemed to me that our ideas had always clashed ever since I had been a kid. There seemed little in my past life that I could heartily thank him for. Time and again he had interfered with my plans. Only a year before he had ruined a plan I had to study music. Thus I had ended up in a bank and was likely to remain there for a long time.

That he always meant well I never doubted. But I was equally sure I knew what was best for me. Dad would make no more decisions for me; I loved Eva and would marry her in the near future, and take care of her.

Mother entered the room cautiously and interrupted my rather impassioned line of thought.

45
The last breath

'Well, how did it go?' she asked in a good attempt to sound light-hearted. But I could tell she was very serious, deep inside.

Mother understood me. She had met Eva some weeks back and had liked her very much. Although she hoped I would change my mind about it all – marriage, that is – she understood my feelings and never tried to argue me out of it.

'He met her,' I said heavily; 'it made little difference to him.' I paused to consider this. 'At least he is still very stubborn. But I'll show him I have a mind of my own!' I finished a little savagely.

'Yes, but be careful!' Mother looked alarmed. 'He looked so dark – and troubled...'

'What does he say? Mother,' I pleaded, suddenly seized by a wave of feeling and passion. 'Why don't you say you understand? Of course I wish Eva could see, but just because she can't, through no fault of her own, it shouldn't make Dad regard her as an outcast. She says I have brought sunshine into her life. Think of that, Mother. If I left her I'd plunge her back into darkness...' For some reason I was near to sobbing. 'And she has brought sunshine into my life too,' I continued bitterly. 'Of all people, she seems to understand me best.'

Silence followed this outburst. I couldn't bring myself to look at Mother in case there were tears already in my eyes. But her eyes I knew were fixed on my face.

'We all understand you,' Mother said at last. 'But we do not want you to be unhappy...'

What empty words. I could not even reply. My happiness was in Eva's hand. They were denying me that hand for marriage, thus plunging me into the depths of misery.

'Your father cares for your happiness more than you know,' Mother went on. 'Do not forget that... He looked so dark and troubled when you came in. It is bad for his health.'

Something in her voice made me turn and look at her. Her hand was on the door knob and its movements were nervous, I thought. But what struck me most was the urgent, pleading look that had come into her eyes. 'Your father is a sick man,' she said in a voice that chilled my heart. 'I'll have to tell you this, now. You are not a child any more. Your father is very sick!'

'Sick!' I stammered. Our eyes held. Hers were wide and staring.

She leaned forward. Her voice was almost frightening as she said in a hoarse whisper, 'Your father has got lung cancer. You are old enough to be told... You have heard him cough – So be careful what you do!'

She turned and left the room, leaving me stunned, not quite comprehending.

Time passed away and with it most of the sunshine. Most of the time the weather was bleak and the sky dark and grey. And a dark shadow lay on

our home. Sunshine seemed forever gone from my Mother.

The grass was wet on a July afternoon as Eva and I sat on a block of stone near the school. She seemed excited as though she had something to tell me.

I also had lots to tell her. I felt for the ring to make sure it was still there.

She looked at me as if she could see through her dark glasses. She lay a little tender hand on my knee. 'You look sad,' she said.

How pretty she was! She had a smooth oval face, and a dimpled little cheek. I often wondered what colour her eyes would have been without the whiteness of her opaque cornea.

'Sad?' I said with a smile, 'but you can't see me!'

'Yes – but I can feel you are sad,' she said. 'What is wrong? Please tell me.'

My voice was serious as I said, 'Dad is worse... We saw him again yesterday and I could –' I checked myself. 'The doctor didn't look happy, I know Dad hasn't much of a chance.'

Eva sat very still. I looked at her and felt happy. As always she understood... She turned away her face.

'How terrible!' she said.

How could I ever leave this angel? To me she was perfect – I wanted her as she was.

'Dad forgive me,' I thought as I took out the ring, looked at it for a while thoughtfully. A wry smile came on my face. Wasn't life queer? Things turn out so very different from the way we picture them in our childish dreams.

A shiny diamond ring... The girl's shy eyes looking up at me as I slipped it on to her finger...

That had been my dream. I took her hand and slipped the cheap copper ring onto her finger. One or two imitation jewels gleamed. It didn't look too bad.

Her surprised face looked up.

'Wh – What is that?' she asked breathlessly.

'A ring,' I said. 'Don't you know? You and I are getting married.' My voice was calm but there was a lump of excitement in my throat.

With her other hand she felt the ring. Suddenly she pulled it off and put it on my knee.

'No!' she said, 'Let's wait a while!' Her voice was shaking and low, almost to a breathless whisper.

'Wait?' I asked. 'What for?'

A slow smile lit up her face and she looked up to the sky. I had never seen her looking like this – happy and bright as an angel.

'Eva!' I said, holding her hand to replace the ring, 'I don't want to wait. I need you now. What do you want us to wait for?'

'Till I can see the ring,' she said. 'I want to see the ring!'

I stared at her. It was chilly but I felt sweat on my neck.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

I saw a tear creep down her cheek, underneath her dark glasses.

'That's what I wanted to tell you,' she said. 'I've got my bags packed!'

'Packed?' I didn't quite... see...

'Yes,' she said. 'I'm going to the hospital to receive a new cornea from – from someone else... Someone who is about to – to cross over.'

I stared at her. I licked my lips. 'You mean that someone has –?'

She nodded. 'I have no idea who it is,' she said. 'But God bless him. I don't know why he should want to do this for me. But I'm going to see again! God bless him...!'

I just stared. I couldn't find any words to say. My heart was beating hard and loud – with unspeakable joy. But sorrow was equally great.



July too passed away and a great grey blanket seemed to have been lifted back to let the sun smile again. It was August, and life was once more brisk and lively.

I walked down the garden path whistling to myself. The oranges, for which I was aiming with my basket, looked beautiful and yellow in the sun.

Suddenly I stopped, the smile dying on my face. I stood still. Then I walked towards the mound of earth a little way off.

I stood there looking at the grave. I swallowed hard. He was seeing me! I knew he was.

'I must say thanks,' I said with a sudden burst of feeling. 'You always had a kind heart and you really showed that with your last breath. Each time she looks at me with those lovely eyes...'

I broke off. How stupid to stand talking to a mute grave. It was like talking to oneself. There was no time to waste, on a fine morning like this – especially with Eva and Mother back in the house waiting for the oranges.

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

♦ Revision questions

- 1 a) Why do you think the narrator and his father went to see Eva?
b) How did the narrator's father react after seeing Eva?
- 2 'Then give her eyes.' These were words said by the narrator in anger, which ironically came true. Explain how this happened.
- 3 What was the cause of the terrible coughing by the narrator's father?
- 4 Discuss the characters of the narrator, his father, his mother, and Eva. Which of them do you admire most and why?

Amos Tutuola

Ajaiyi and the witch doctor

AMOS TUTUOLA was born in Abeokuta, Western Nigeria, in 1920. He trained as a blacksmith, and worked as a soldier and a messenger for the Department of Labour. His first novel, *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952), was an instant success, mainly because of its unusual style, its non-standard English, and its simple language. The English critic and poet Dylan Thomas described it as 'young English', and though some later African writers disagreed about its importance as a literary work, the novel successfully blends the art of oral storytelling with the written genre.

Tutuola's second novel, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, explores the Yoruba mythological underworld of spirits and ancestors, and is written in the same non-standard English style. Since then, Tutuola has published several other novels which have been popular as well as controversial.

The story that follows is a good example of his simple and powerful oral style, and his light-hearted humour. It is the fable of Ajaiyi who cannot escape the defeating spiral of poverty and so pawns himself to get money. Ajaiyi is as much the victim of circumstances as the victim of his greedy witch doctor, but in an ironic twist at the end of the tale, he gets the better of everyone!

Several years ago there was an old man who lived in a village. He was a farmer and had one son named Ajaiyi. This old man was so poor that all of his friends and neighbours believed that he was really created in poverty by his creator. After several years' hard work this poor old man became too old and weary to work in his farm. But Ajaiyi, his only son, took over from him. He was working hard in his old father's farm and by that he was getting sufficient food to feed his father and himself. Ajaiyi worked as hard as he could until he became thirty years old but yet, he and his father's poverty became worse than ever.

Now, one midnight, it came to Ajaiyi's mind to get a wife of his own as all of his friends had. Having thought so within himself for some weeks, he brought this matter before his weary father:

'My father, how can I get money with which to marry a lady as I am old enough now?' Ajaiyi gently asked his father. 'In fact, according to our custom, it is the father's right to pay the dowry of his son's first wife. But now, it is a pity, as you know, that I am so poor that I have not even a halfpenny to give you to pay for the dowry of a lady. I am very sorry indeed, Ajaiyi,' Ajaiyi's father explained quietly with tears. Then Ajaiyi left him in the room and went to the front of the house. He sat on the pavement and wept bitterly.

After a while, it came to Ajaiyi's mind to pawn himself for money. At the same time he went to a wealthy pawnbroker who gave him sufficient money with which he married a beautiful and sensible lady the following week.

A few months after his marriage, his father became seriously ill so that he died within a few days. But unfortunately, Ajaiyi had no money to perform the funeral ceremony of his dead father. Of course as it would have been a great shame to Ajaiyi if he had failed to perform the ceremony, he pawned himself to another pawnbroker who gave him the money to perform the ceremony.

Now, Ajaiyi had pawned himself to two pawnbrokers. He was working for the first from morning till twelve o'clock and for the second from one o'clock till the sun set. But as Ajaiyi had not sufficient time any more to work on his own farm for his and his wife's living, his poverty became more serious. And as everything was still growing from bad to worse every day, his wife advised him one day:

'Ajaiyi, will you go to the witch doctor and find out the causes of our poverty and find out as well what can stop it.'

Without hesitation, Ajaiyi went to the village witch doctor. He explained to him about his inherited poverty. But with a sharp and merciless voice the witch doctor replied: 'If you want your poverty to stop, you must buy nine rams and nine empty sacks. Having bought all and brought them to your house, you will put each of the rams alive inside each of the empty sacks. Then at midnight, you will carry all to the grave of your father and put all on top of the grave. But to make sure whether your dead father has taken the rams, go back to the grave the following morning. I am quite sure, you will meet only the nine empty sacks on top of the grave and that means your dead father has taken all the rams. But try to bring the empty sacks back to your house and keep them in the room and you will be surprised, in a few days' time, when all are filled up with money by your dead father to find you will be freed from your poverty. But you must come and tell me as soon as you have put the rams on top of the grave!'

When the witch doctor had explained to Ajaiyi what to do before his poverty could be stopped, he thanked him and then left his house.

But as Ajaiyi was returning to his house in the darkness, he began to think in his mind. 'The witch doctor said I had to sacrifice nine rams to my dead father before I could be freed from the poverty! But I believe, I will never be free from this poverty because I have no money to buy even a small cock. How much more do I need for nine rams!'

'What did the witch doctor tell you about our poverty, Ajaiyi?' Ajaiyi's wife hastily asked as he entered the house and he explained to her what the witch doctor told him to do. But as Ajaiyi explained further that he had no money to buy the rams and the empty sacks, his wife said loudly:

'Ah, Ajaiyi, you said you have no money to buy the rams! Are we going to die in this poverty? Better you pawn yourself to the third pawnbroker who will give you the money to buy the rams and the empty sacks!'

'Ah! To pawn myself to the third pawnbroker? But I am afraid if I do so, how can I satisfy the whole of them and who will be working for our own living then?' Ajaiyi asked with great sorrow.

'Never mind about our living, Ajaiyi. I believe if you work hard, you will satisfy all the pawnbrokers!' Ajaiyi's wife advised him strongly.

The following morning, Ajaiyi went to the third pawnbroker who gave him ten pounds. Then he and his wife went to the market with the ten pounds. But unfortunately, the ten pounds were not sufficient to buy the whole nine rams and the nine empty sacks. Having seen this, Ajaiyi was greatly perplexed. He told his wife to let them return home with the money. 'Oh, my husband, don't let us go home with this money otherwise we shall spend it for unnecessary things and yet our poverty will remain as it is. But now, let us buy as many rams and empty sacks as it can buy. Then at midnight, you will carry them to the grave of your father. You will explain before the grave that you will bring the rest as soon as you have money to buy them. And I believe, your father will not refuse to accept them because he knew that he had left you in great poverty before he died.'

Ajaiyi agreed when his wife advised him like that. Then they bought the six rams and the six empty sacks that the ten pounds could buy and they carried them back to the house.

When it was midnight, Ajaiyi put each of the rams inside each of the sacks. He carried them one by one to the grave of his father which was about a half of a mile from the village. Having put all on top of the grave, he explained before it that:

'My father, please take these six rams as the first instalment and I shall bring the other three for you as soon as you help me to get money to buy them.'

Having done all that, Ajaiyi went direct to the witch doctor. He told him that he had carried six rams to the grave. He thanked Ajaiyi with great laughter and then he advised him that he must not keep long before taking the other three to the grave. After that Ajaiyi came back to his house in the darkness. But he had hardly left before the witch doctor and his servants went to the grave and carried the whole six rams to his own

Ajaiyi and the witch doctor

house. He killed all for his food and then he gave the empty sacks to his servants to return them to the grave before daybreak.

Early in the morning, Ajaiyi and his wife ran to the grave and both were very happy when they met only the empty sacks on top of the grave for they believed the dead father had taken the rams into his grave. Then with surprise, they carried the empty sacks back to the house. Ajaiyi put them in the room and then he and his wife were expecting the dead father to fill them with the money. But they waited and waited and waited for many months and the sacks were not filled with money and their poverty become even worse. Again all the three pawnbrokers were dragging him here and there for he failed to satisfy any of them. Then he blamed his wife with sorrow: 'I told you in the market that day that we should return home with the money as it was not sufficient to buy all the rams at one time!'

'Ajaiyi, don't let us give up yet, we must try hard. My advice now is to go back to the witch doctor and find out why our poverty is getting even worse than before we sacrificed the six rams to your dead father,' Ajaiyi's wife advised him softly. Again, Ajaiyi ran back to the witch doctor and asked for the reason.

'Ah! your poverty cannot end yet and the sacks in your room cannot be filled with money as you expect until after you have taken the three rams to your dead father!'

The witch doctor frightened Ajaiyi. Without hesitation, Ajaiyi came back to his house and told his wife what the witch doctor had told him.

'What are we going to do next to get money to buy the rams and the empty sacks?' she asked calmly.

'As you know that we have not even one penny in hand, how can we get enough money to buy three rams and sacks! But now, my plan is that when it is midnight, I will visit my father in his grave. I will say to him "You knew that I was in great poverty before you died. But after you died and were buried, you demanded nine rams from me and if I fail to give them to you, I will remain in poverty throughout my lifetime. Of course, I tried my best and brought six for you. But I was surprised to hear from the same witch doctor that you insist on taking the other three rams from me before you would set me free from the poverty which I have inherited from you."'

Ajaiyi explained further to his wife that if his dead father confirmed what the witch doctor had told him to do then he would behead him before he could come out of his grave.

'Ah! Ajaiyi, that is a childish idea. How can you manage to visit your dead father in his grave? Please don't attempt to do that!' His wife was very much afraid.

At midnight, Ajaiyi sharpened his long and heavy matchet. After that he took three empty sacks and went to the grave of his father. Having reached there, he filled two sacks with the earth in such a perfect way that each seemed as if it contained a ram and then he put both on top of

the grave. Having done that, he left the third sack and his matchet on the grave and then he went to the witch doctor. He told him that he had put the other three rams on top of the grave. The witch doctor burst into a great laughter when he heard so from Ajaiyi. He thought that he would get three rams that night as before. And he was still laughing when Ajaiyi left him with sorrow and went back to the grave.

As soon as he reached there, he put the third empty sack nearly touching the two which he had filled up with the earth. As he held his long matchet he entered it and cast down in it and then he was expecting his father to take the three sacks into his grave. Ajaiyi did not know that it was the witch doctor himself who had taken the six rams and killed them for food.

After about two hours, the witch doctor and his servants walked in the darkness to the grave. He ordered his servants to carry the three sacks to his house. They hardly put them down before the gods when their master, the witch doctor, began to loose the sacks in the hope of bringing the rams out and then returning the empty sacks to the grave before day-break so that Ajaiyi might believe that his dead father had taken away the rams. But he was greatly shocked when he saw the earth in the first two sacks instead of rams and he hardly loosened the third when Ajaiyi jumped out suddenly with his long sharp matchet which was raised above his head.

'Ah! Ajaiyi, you were in the sack as well!' The witch doctor and his servants defended their heads and faces with hands with great fear.

Without hesitation, Ajaiyi walked wildly to the witch doctor. He stood firmly before him as he raised the matchet above head and said quietly: 'Hun: un! my rams in respect of which I had already pawned myself to the third pawnbroker before I could get ten pounds and...!'

'Oh, let me confess to you now, Ajaiyi! It was not your dead father who had taken all your rams but I was the right person who had taken them! I beg you now to forgive me!' the witch doctor hastily confessed as he began to sweat with fear as Ajaiyi was preparing to matchet him and his servants to death.

'But I believe you are my dead father who has taken my rams therefore you are to set me free from my poverty this midnight!' Ajaiyi shouted loudly as he threatened him with the matchet.

'I am not your dead father at all therefore I have no power to set you free from your poverty,' the witch doctor explained loudly with fear. But Ajaiyi hardly heard him speak like that and he snatched his right hand and asked loudly:

'Tell me the truth! Will you set me free from my poverty this midnight?'

'Only your dead father has the power to set you free from your pov...'

But as the witch doctor was still shaking and murmuring with fear his servants rushed against Ajaiyi and he too joined them at the same time. All were just trying to take the matchet from him. Having struggled for a

few minutes, Ajaiyi overpowered them when he struck many of them with the matchet. Once more, he snatched the right hand of the witch doctor and began to drag him here and there in the room. And as he shouted for help Ajaiyi closed his mouth with the flat part of his matchet. Having seen how wild Ajaiyi had become that moment, his servants kept quiet as well and they stretched up their hands.

'Certainly, you are my dead father who will set me free from my poverty this midnight!' Ajaiyi roared loudly.

'But Ajaiyi, I am not a dead man but the witch doctor of this village,' the witch doctor murmured with fear especially when he looked around and saw that all of his servants had already escaped outside in fear of their lives.

'Whether you are a dead man or not, I don't mind, but show me where you keep your money!' Ajaiyi shouted and pushed him with the matchet.

The witch doctor walked with fear to the spot where he kept his money in a big pot before one of his fearful gods. He pointed his fingers to the pot. Without hesitation, Ajaiyi put the pot on his head and carried it to his house that midnight. When he and his wife counted the money which was in the pot it was more than six hundred pounds. So Ajaiyi and his wife were freed from their poverty that midnight.

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

♦ Revision questions

- 1 a) Explain what it means to pawn oneself.
b) Why did Ajaiyi have to pawn himself?
- 2 Look at the following expressions:
 - 'to pay for the dowry of a lady'
 - 'to think in his mind'
 - 'satisfy the whole of them'
 - 'Ajaiyi closed his mouth with the flat part of his matchet'.

Note that these expressions are not in standard or correct English. They are examples of direct translations from vernacular.

 - a) Put them in correct English.
 - b) Find as many of such expressions as possible and correct them.
 - c) How can you explain the use of direct translation in this story?
- 3 Would you have taken in the witch doctor's advice as easily as Ajaiyi did? Why or why not?
- 4 Ajaiyi is said to have married 'a sensible lady'. What kind of person can be said to be sensible? Do you find Ajaiyi's wife sensible? Why or why not?
- 5 a) Discuss Ajaiyi's character.
b) What eventually made him wiser?

Grace Ogot

Tekayo

GRACE OGOT was born in the Central Nyanza district of Kenya in 1930, and has been active in many varied careers. She has worked as a nurse, radio programmer for the BBC, journalist, headmistress, university teacher, Assistant Minister in the Kenyan Government, and as a delegate to the United Nations.

She is best known to people outside Africa, though, as a writer, and her collection of stories *Land Without Thunder* has been widely read. She has also published three novels, one written in her first language Dhuluo. Like many African writers, she is concerned with language – should we Africans write in English or French, or Portuguese (the received languages), or should we write in our own tongue? The debate is complicated: some writers argue that writing in English reaches the international community, but others say that by using a colonial, racist language we will not be able to express African culture and experience accurately.

'Tekayo' is an unusual and unforgettable story which deals with a theme not often tackled by other writers. It tells of an old man who has developed an obsession for meat from an unknown animal, which he has to satisfy whatever the cost. The story is chilling, but written in Grace Ogot's typically powerful narrative style, it absorbs and fascinates the reader as much as it repels.

The period of short rains was just starting in a semi-arid part of the Sudan. The early morning mist had cleared, and faint blue smoke rose from the ground as the hot sun touched the surface of the wet earth.

'People in the underworld are cooking.'

'People in the underworld are cooking!' the children shouted, as they pelted one another with wet sand.

Tekayo

'Come on, Opija,' Tekayo shouted to his son. 'Give me a hand, I must get the cows to the river before it is too hot.'

Opija hit his younger brother with his last handful of sand, and then ran to help his father. The cows were soon out of the village and Tekayo picked up the leather pouch containing his lunch and followed them.

They had not gone far from home when Tekayo saw an eagle flying above his head with a large piece of meat in its claws. The eagle was flying low searching for a suitable spot to have its meal. Tekayo promptly threw his stick at the bird. He hit the meat and it dropped to the ground. It was a large piece of liver, and fresh blood was still oozing from it. Tekayo nearly threw the meat away, but he changed his mind. What was the use of robbing the eagle of its food only to throw it away? The meat looked good: it would supplement his vegetable lunch wonderfully. He wrapped the meat in a leaf and pushed it into his pouch.

They reached a place where there was plenty of grass. Tekayo allowed the cows to graze while he sat under an *ober*¹ tree watching the sky. It was not yet lunch time, but Tekayo could not wait. The desire to taste that meat was burning within him. He took out the meat and roasted it on a log fire under the *ober* tree. When the meat was cooked he ate it greedily with millet bread which his wife had made the previous night.

'My! What delicious meat,' Tekayo exclaimed. He licked the fat juice that stained his fingers, and longed for a little more. He threw away the bitter herbs that were the rest of his lunch. The meat was so good, and the herbs would merely spoil its taste.

The sun was getting very hot, but the cows showed no desire to go to the river to drink. One by one they lay down in the shade, chewing the cud. Tekayo also became overpowered by the afternoon heat. He rested against the trunk and slept.

While asleep, Tekayo had a dream. He was sitting before a log fire roasting a large piece of liver like the one he had eaten earlier. His mouth watered as he watched rich fat from the roasting meat dropping into the fire. He could not wait, and although the meat was not completely done, he removed it from the fire and cut it up with his hunting knife. But just as he was about to take the first bite, he woke up.

Tekayo looked around him, wondering what had happened to the meat! Could it be that he was dreaming? 'No, no, no,' he cried. 'It was too vivid to be a dream!' He sat upright and had another look around, as if by some miracle he might see a piece of liver roasting on the log fire beside him. But there was nothing. All he saw were large roots of the old tree protruding above the earth's surface like sweet potatoes in the sandy soil.

The cattle had wandered a long way off. Tekayo got up and followed them. They reached the river bank, and the thirsty cows ran to the river. While the cows drank, Tekayo sat on a white stone cooling his feet and gazing lazily at the swollen river as it flowed mightily towards the plain.

Beyond the river stood the great 'Ghost Jungle'. A strong desire for the rich meat came back to Tekayo, and he whispered, 'The animal with that

delicious liver must surely be in that jungle.' He sat there for a while, thinking. The temptation to start hunting for the animal nagged him. But he managed to suppress it. The afternoon was far spent and they were a long way from home.

The next morning Tekayo left home earlier than usual. When his wife begged him to wait for his lunch, he refused. He hurried from home, taking his hunting spears with him.

Tekayo made it impossible for the cows to graze. He rushed them along, lashing at any cow that lingered in one spot for long. They reached the edge of the 'Ghost Jungle' and there he left the cows grazing unattended.

Tekayo could not see any path or track leading into the 'Ghost Jungle'. The whole place was a mass of thick bush and long grass covered with the morning dew. And except for the sounds of mating birds, there was a weird silence in the jungle that frightened him. But the vehement desire within him blindly drove him on, through the thick wet grass.

After walking for some time, he stood and listened. Something was racing towards him. He turned round to look, and sure enough a big impala was running frantically towards him. Warm blood rushed through Tekayo's body, and he raised his spear to kill the animal. But the spear never landed. He came face to face with a big leopardess that was chasing the impala. The leopardess roared at Tekayo several times challenging him, as it were, to a duel. But Tekayo looked away, clutching the spear in his trembling hand. There was no-one to fight and the beast went away after her prey.

'What a bad start,' Tekayo said slowly and quietly when his heart beat normally again. 'That wild cat will not leave me alone now.'

He started to walk back towards the plain, following the track he had made. The roaring leopardess had taken the life out of him.

He saw another track that cut across the forest. He hesitated a little, and then decided to follow it, leaving his own. The track got bigger and bigger, and without any warning Tekayo suddenly came upon a baby wildebeest which was following a large flock grazing at the foot of a hill. He killed it without any difficulty. He skinned the animal and extracted its liver, leaving the rest of the carcass there.

Tekayo returned to the herd, and he sat down to roast the meat on a log fire. When the meat was cooked he took a bite and chewed it hurriedly. But he did not swallow it: he spat it all out! The liver was as bitter as the strong green herbs given to constipated children. The back of his tongue was stinging as if it had been burned. Tekayo threw the rest of the meat away and took his cows home.

He arrived home tired and disappointed; and when his young wife set food before him, he refused to eat. He pretended that he had stomach-ache and did not feel like eating. That night Tekayo was depressed and in low spirits. He did not even desire his young wife who slept by his side. At dawn the young wife returned to her hut disappointed, wondering why the old man had not desired her.

The doors of all the huts were still closed when Tekayo looked out through his door. A cold east wind hit his face, and he quickly shut himself in again.

It was getting rather late and the calves were calling. But it was pouring with rain so much that he could not start milking. He sat on the hard bed looking at the dead ashes in the fire-place. He longed to get out to start hunting.

When the rain stopped, Tekayo milked the cows in a great hurry. Then he picked up the lunch that had been left near his hut for him, and left the village. His disappointed wife of the previous night watched him till he disappeared at the gate.

When he reached the 'Ghost Jungle', it was drizzling again. The forest looked so lonely and wet. He left the cows grazing as usual, and entered the bush, stealing his way through the dripping leaves. He turned to the left to avoid the thick part of the jungle. Luck was with him. He spotted a family of antelope grazing not far from him. He crawled on his knees till he was quite close to them, and then threw his spear killing one animal instantly. After skinning it, he extracted its liver, and also took some delicate parts for the family.

When he sat down under the tree to roast the meat, Tekayo was quite sure that he had been successful. But when he tasted the meat, he shook his head. The meat was tender, but it was not what he was looking for.

They reached the river bank. The cows continued to graze after drinking, and Tekayo, without realising it, wandered a long way from his herd, still determined to discover the owner of that wonderful liver. When he suddenly looked round, the herd was nowhere to be seen. The sun was sinking behind Mount Pajulu, and Tekayo started to run, looking for his cows.

The cows, heavy with milk, had gone home without Tekayo. For one day when Tekayo's children got lost in the forest, the cows had gone home without them, following the old track they knew well. On that day the whole village came out in search of the children in fear that the wild animals might harm them.

It was getting dark when Tekayo arrived home. They started to milk and Odipo remarked. 'Why, Father, you are late coming home today.'

'It is true,' replied Tekayo thoughtfully. 'See that black bull there? He went to another herd across the river. I didn't miss him until it was time to come home. One of these days, we shall have to castrate him - he is such a nuisance.'

They milked in silence until one of the little girls came to fetch some milk for preparing vegetables.

At supper time the male members of the family sat around the log fire waiting and talking. One by one, baskets of millet meal and earthen dishes of meat and vegetables arrived from different huts. There was fish, dried meat, fried white ants, and herbs. A little food was thrown to the ground, to the ancestors, and then they started eating. They compared and con-

Tekayo

tasted the deliciousness of the various dishes they were having. But Tekayo kept quiet. All the food he tasted that evening was bitter as bile. *Smile*

When the meal was over, the adults told stories of war and the clans to the children, who listened attentively. But Tekayo was not with them: he was not listening. He watched the smoky clouds as they raced across the sky. *He was at the door & I was in the room*

'Behind those clouds, behind those clouds, rests Okenyu, my great-grandfather. Please! Please!' Tekayo beseeched him. 'Please, father, take this longing away from me. Give me back my manhood that I may desire my wives. For what is a man without this desire?' *Manhood*

A large cloud covered the moon giving the earth temporary darkness. Tears stung Tekayo's eyes, and he dismissed the family to sleep. As he entered his own hut, a woman was throwing small logs on the fire.

He offered many secret prayers to the departed spirits, but the craving for the mysterious liver never left him. Day after day he left home in the morning, taking his cows with him. And on reaching the jungle, he left them unattended while he hunted. The rough and disappointed life that he led soon became apparent to the family. He suddenly became old and disinterested in life. He had nothing to tell his sons around the evening fire, and he did not desire his wives. The sons of Tekayo went to Lakech and told her, 'Mother, speak to father - he is sick. He does not talk to us, and he does not eat. We don't know how to approach him.'

Though Lakech had passed the age of child-bearing and no longer went to Tekayo's hut at night, she was his first wife, and he loved her. She therefore went and asked him, 'Man, what ails you?' Tekayo looked at Lakech, but he could not look into her eyes. He looked at her long neck, and instead of answering her question he asked her, 'Would you like to get free from those heavy brass rings around your neck?'

'Why?' Lakech replied, surprised.

'Because they look so tight.'

'But they are not tight,' Lakech said softly. 'I would feel naked without them.'

And Tekayo looked away from his wife. He was longing to tell Lakech everything, and to share with her this maddening craving that was tearing his body to pieces. But he checked himself. Lakech must not know; she would not understand. Then he lied to her.

'It is my old indigestion. I have had it for weeks now. It will soon pass.'

A mocking smile played on Lakech's lips, and Tekayo knew that she was not convinced. Some visitors arrived, and Lakech left her husband.

Tekayo hunted for many months, but he did not succeed in finding the animal with the delicious liver.

One night, as he lay awake, he asked himself where else he could hunt. And what animal would he be looking for? He had killed all the different animals in the 'Ghost Jungle'. He had risked his life when he killed and ate the liver of a lion, a leopard and a hyena, all of which were tabooed by his clan.

Dream

A little sleep came to Tekayo's heavy eyes and he was grateful. But then Apii stood beside his bed calling: 'Grandpa, Grandpa, it is me.' Tekayo sat up, but the little girl was not there. He went back to sleep again. And Apii was there calling him: 'Can't you hear me, Grandpa?'

Tekayo woke up a second time, but nobody was there. He lay down without closing his eyes. Again the child's fingers touched his drooping hand, and the playful voice of a child tickled the skin of the old man. Tekayo sat up a third time, and looked round the room. But he was alone. The cock crew a third time, and it was morning.

And Lakech died without knowing her husband's secret, and was buried in the middle of the village, being the first wife. Tekayo sat at his wife's grave morning and evening for a long time, and his grief for her appeased his hunger for the unknown animal's liver. He wept, but peacefully, as if his craving for the liver was buried with his wife.

It was during this time of grief that Tekayo decided never to go hunting again. He sat at home and looked after his many grandchildren, while the younger members of the family went out to work daily in the fields.

And then one day as Tekayo sat warming himself in the early morning sun near the granary, he felt slightly sick from the smell of grain sprouting inside the dark store. The shouting and singing of his grandchildren attracted his attention. As he watched them playing, the craving for the liver of the unknown animal returned powerfully to him.

Now among the children playing was a pretty little girl called Apii, the daughter of Tekayo's eldest son. Tekayo sent the other children away to play, and as they were going, he called Apii and told her, 'Come my little one, run to your mother's hut and bring me a calabash of water.'

Apii ran to her mother's hut to get water for her grandfather. And while she was fumbling in a dark corner of the house looking for a clean calabash, strong hands gripped her neck and strangled her. She gave a weak cry as she struggled for the breath of life. But it was too much for her. Her eyes closed in everlasting sleep, never to see the beauty of the shining moon again.

The limp body of the child slipped from Tekayo's hands and fell on the floor with a thud. He looked at the body at his feet and felt sick and faint. His ears were buzzing. He picked up the body, and as he staggered out with it, the air seemed black, and the birds of the air screamed ominously at him. But Tekayo had to eat his meal. He buried the body of Apii in a nearby anthill in a shallow grave.

The other children were still playing in the field when Tekayo returned with the liver in his bag. He roasted it in his hut hastily and ate it greedily. And alas! it was what he had been looking for for many years. He sat lazily resting his back on the granary, belching and picking his teeth. The hungry children, back from their play in the fields, sat in the shade eating sweet potatoes and drinking sour milk.

The older people came back in the evening, and the children ran to meet their parents. But Apii was not amongst them. In great desperation the

asked the grandfather about the child. But Tekayo replied, 'Ask the children - they should know where Apii is. They were playing together in the fields.'

It was already pitch dark. Apii's younger brothers and sisters sat in front of the fire weeping with their mother. It was then that they remembered their grandfather sending Apii to fetch water for him. The desperate parents repeated this information to the old man, asking him if Apii had brought water for him that morning.

'She did,' Tekayo replied, 'and then ran away after the others. I watched her go with my own eyes. When they came back, I was asleep.'

The grief-stricken family sat near the fire-place, their heads in their hands. They neither ate nor drank. Outside the little crickets sang in chorus as if they had a secret to tell.

For many days Apii's parents looked for their child, searching every corner and every nook. But there was no trace of her. Apii was gone. Months went by, and people talked no more about the disappearance of Apii. Only her mother thought of her. She did not lose hope of finding her child alive one day.

Tekayo forgot his deed. And when he killed a second child the same way to satisfy his savage appetite, he was not even conscious of what he was doing. And when the worried parents asked the old man about the child, Tekayo wept saying, 'How could I know? The children play out in the fields - I stay here at home.'

It was after this that Tekayo's sons said among themselves, 'Who steals our children? Which animal can it be? Could it be a hyena? Or a leopard? But these animals only hunt at night. Could it be an eagle, because it hunts during the day? But no! Father would have seen the eagle - he would have heard the child screaming.' After some thought, Aganda told his brother, 'Perhaps it is a malicious animal brought upon us by the evil spirits.'

'Then my father is too old to watch the children,' put in Osogo. 'Yes, Father is too old, he is in danger,' the rest agreed.

And from that time onwards the sons kept watch secretly on the father and the children. They watched for many months, but nothing threatened the man and the children.

The sons were almost giving up the watch. But one day when it was the turn of Apii's father to keep watch, he saw Tekayo sending away the children to play in the field - all except one. He sent this child to fetch him a pipe from his hut. As the child ran to the hut, Tekayo followed him. He clasped the frightened child and dragged him towards the fire-place. As Tekayo was struggling with the child, a heavy blow landed on his old back. He turned round sharply, his hands still holding the child's neck. He was facing Aganda, his eldest son. The child broke loose from the limp hands of Tekayo and grabbed Aganda's knees as if he had just escaped from the teeth of a crocodile. 'Father!' Aganda shouted.

Seeing that the child was not hurt, Aganda pushed him aside saying, 'Go to your mother's hut and lie down.'

He then got hold of the old man and dragged him towards the little windowless hut built for goats and sheep. As he was being dragged away, the old man kept on crying, 'Atimo ang'o? Atimo ang'o?' (What have I done? What have I done?)

Aganda pushed the old man into the little hut and barred the door behind him, as you would to the animals. He went to the child who was still sobbing.

The rest of the family returned from the fields, and when Apii's father broke the news to them, they were appalled. The family wore mourning garments and went without food.

'Tho! Tho!'² they spat towards the sun which, although setting on them, was rising on the ancestors.

'Great-grandfathers, cleanse us,' they all cried.

And they lit the biggest fire that had ever been lit in that village. Tekayo's eldest son took the old greasy drum hanging above the fire-place in his father's hut and beat it. The drum throbbed out sorrowful tunes to warn the clan that there was sad news in Tekayo's home. The people who heard the drum left whatever they were doing and ran to Tekayo's village following the sound of the drum. Within a short time the village was teeming with anxious-looking relatives

'What news? What news?' they asked in trembling voices.

'And where is Tekayo?' another old man asked.

'Is he in good health?' asked another.

There was confusion and panic.

'Death of death, who will give us medicine for death? Death knocks at your door, and before you can tell him to come in, he is in the house with you.'

'Listen!' Someone touched the old woman who was mourning about death. Aganda spoke to the people.

'Men of my clan. We have not called you here for nothing. Listen to me and let our sorrow be yours. Weep with us! For several months we have been losing our children when we go to work on the fields. Apii, my own child, was the first one to disappear.' Sobbing broke out among the women at the mention of the children's names.

'My people,' Aganda continued, 'the children in this clan get sick and die. But ours disappear unburied. It was our idea to keep watch over our children that we may catch whoever steals them. For months we have been watching secretly. We were almost giving up because we thought it was probably the wrath of our ancestors that was upon us. But today I caught him.'

'What man? What man?' the people demanded angrily.

'And from what clan is he?' others asked.

'We must declare war on his clan, we must we must!'

Aganda stopped for a while, and told them in a quavering voice, 'The man is in that little hut. The man is no-one else but my father.'

'Mayo!'³ the women shouted. There was a scuffle and the women and children screamed as if Tekayo was around the fire, and they were afraid of him. But the men kept quiet.

When the commotion died down, an old man asked, 'Do you speak the truth, man?'

The son nodded. Men and women now shouted, 'Where is the man? Kill him! He is not one of us. He is not one of us. He is an animal!' *Mute phor*

There was nothing said outside that Tekayo did not hear. And there in the hut the children he had killed haunted him. He laid his head on the rough wall of the hut and wept.

Outside the hut the angry villagers continued with their demand, shouting, 'Stone him now! Stone him now! Let his blood be upon his own head!'

But one of the old men got up and calmed the people.

'We cannot stone him now. It is the custom of the clan that a wicked man should be stoned in broad daylight, outside the village. We cannot depart from this custom.' *fradlet in*

'Stone me now, stone me now,' Tekayo whispered. 'Take me away quickly from this torture and shame. Let me die and be finished with.'

Tekayo knew by the angry shouting of the men and the shrill cries of frightened women and children that he was banished from society, nay, from life itself. He fumbled in his leather bag suspended around his waist to find his hunting knife, but it was not there. It had been taken away from him.

The muttering and shouting continued outside. There was weeping too. But Tekayo was now hearing them from afar as if a powerful wave were carrying him further and further away from his people.

At dawn the villagers got up from the fire-place to gather stones from nearby fields. The sun was not up yet, but it was just light enough to see. Everyone in the clan must throw a stone at the murderer. It was bad not to throw a stone, for it was claimed that the murderer's wicked spirit would rest upon the man who did not help to drive him away. *fradlet in*

When the first rays of the sun appeared, the villagers had gathered enough stones to cover several bodies. They returned to the village to fetch Tekayo from the hut, and to lead him to his own garden outside the village. They surrounded the hut and stood in silence, waiting to jeer and spit at him when he came out.

Aganda and three old men tore the papyrus door open and called Tekayo to come out. But there was no reply. They rushed into the hut to drag him out to the people who were now demanding, 'Come out, come out!'

At first it was too dark to see. But soon their eyes got used to the darkness. Then they saw the body of Tekayo, hanged on a short rope that he had unwound from the thatched roof.

The men came out shaking their heads. The crowd peered into the hut in turn until all of them had seen the dangling body of Tekayo - the man

Grace Ogot

they were preparing to stone. No-one spoke. Such a man, they knew, would have to be buried outside the village. They knew too that no new-born child would ever be named after him.

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

♦ Revision questions

- 1 Is it hygienic to eat just any meat? Why?
- 2 In what ways can Tekayo be compared to an eagle?
- 3 a) How did the meat affect Tekayo *immediately* after he ate it?
b) How did it affect his behaviour as a:
 - i) herdsman
 - ii) husband
 - iii) father and grandfather?
- 4 What economic activities is Tekayo's community engaged in?
- 5 Describe an evening in Tekayo's home.
- 6 Show evidence of superstition in this story.
- 7 How are dreams used to develop the plot of the story?
- 8 Identify three incidents of suspense. How does suspense make a story more appealing?
- 9 How do the people announce a disaster?
- 10 Dramatic irony is _____. Identify and explain three incidents of dramatic irony in this story.

♦ Topics for discussion

- 1 Does Tekayo's condition call for sympathy or condemnation? Why?
- 2 'Eating a piece of meat need not have such an emotional effect on a person as it had on Tekayo'. Discuss.
- 3 Is the clan's treatment of Tekayo justified?
- 4 Discuss the moral this story teaches.
- 5 a) What do you think Tekayo should have done about his craving for the 'delicious' piece of meat?
b) How would you help anyone who has such a strong desire or craving for something?
- 6 What feelings does this story arouse in you? Why?

GLOSSARY

- 1 *ober*: a hardwood tree which grows in the Lake Victoria area.
- 2 *Tho! Tho!*: expression used by the Luo of Kenya to express disgust
- 3 *Mayo!*: food!

Barbara Kimenye

The bewitching of Damieno



BARBARA KIMENYE grew up in Uganda, East Africa. This heritage has supplied the inspiration and background to her work over the years. In East Africa she is perhaps best known for the *Moses* series. This has been popular with African schoolchildren for two or more generations and tells the story of a group of mischievous schoolboys in a run-down school. Other works include two collections of short stories, *Kalasanda* and *Kalasanda Revisited*.

All Barbara's books reflect something of her home environment, in a semi-rural area outside Kampala. The story in this collection, *The bewitching of Damieno* is a good example of the way she can skilfully tell the story of a rural community, using all the different voices of that community. She gives the reader an insight into the beliefs, fears, and contradictions of rural village life described with warmth and humour.

If ever a woman loved to cause a sensation or better still be the centre of one, it was Nantondo the Widow. Whose widow she actually was had long since been forgotten, for Nantondo was much older than most of the villagers of Kalasanda, and although her years were to some extent revealed in the grizzled whiskers which bristled on her shaven head, and in the thousands of tiny, dry wrinkles flickering loosely along the skin of her arms whenever she performed the wide, sweeping gestures which formed a basic part of her conversation, still her back looked straight and supple, and above her scrawny neck, her face was lined only by marks of animation.

It so happened that Nantondo's age was perhaps the only subject upon which she did not hold an unquestionable opinion, since neither the year

nor the date of her birth had been recorded, and her general appearance had altered but slightly since her arrival in Kalasanda nearly twenty-five years ago. From incidents she truthfully recollected it was thought by many that she must be somewhere in the mid-seventies, but she purposely muddled the issue by claiming to have been present at events happening more than a hundred years ago.

Whatever happened in the village, be it a domestic squabble, an attempt at theft in the market place, or a boundary dispute, Nantondo made it her business to be the chief witness and adviser, nor were newspapers ever essential when she was in the vicinity.

How she came to be anywhere near Damieno's house on the evening he was bewitched is a question nobody bothers to ask. The fact remains that she was there when the stranger appeared on the path, the sight of whom sent Damieno screaming indoors, and she was still there when the stranger delivered a stirring monologue before the locked door, and placed a long, flat object on the step before departing.

The only unfortunate thing, so far as Nantondo was concerned, was her inability to understand what the stranger said, for Damieno had originated in the Northern Province of Uganda, and the stranger, obviously a fellow countryman of his, spoke a language which had nothing in common with Luganda. But Nantondo had been born in an age when witchcraft flourished, so she did not require six easy lessons to understand that a spell had been cast and, despite the anguished cries which now issued from Damieno's hut, she set off at a steady pace, only pausing to rest when she judged herself well out of range of any supernatural influence.

Any other normal-minded, public spirited villager would have gone straightaway to the Ggombolola Chief of the area and left him to deal with the matter. But not Nantondo. The root of the trouble, although Nantondo could hardly be expected to appreciate it, was that the *Kabaka*¹ had insisted on only men of good administrative ability being appointed as Chiefs, regardless of their family connexions, and the Ggombolola Chief, whose district included Kalasanda, had completed an extensive course in Local Government at Oxford before being appointed to his post. He had made a desperate bid to put into practice everything he had learned and, needless to say, that did not include receiving instructions on how to perform his duties from well-meaning old ladies.

So it was that Nantondo decided to ignore the official authority, and spread a general alarm from the compound of Yosefu Mukasa, the wealthy coffee farmer, who was locally reputed to have a certain amount of influence at Mengo. To reach the Mukasa homestead, it was necessary for Nantondo to pass several smaller houses where she would have been very welcome to stay and gossip, but she dismissed the temptation to tell the ordinary people of what she had just witnessed. After all, this time she really had news. Why waste it on the common herd? They would all know soon enough. Meanwhile, she must prepare a good line for Yosefu

Mukasa. Who knows? He might even think it worthwhile to mention her name at Mengo... she could visualise him having a confidential chat with the *Kabaka* and, if the affair was properly handled, it was highly possible that she would receive some special recognition – a pension, say, or better still, a piece of really good land. If the villagers got the first wind of this, it would emerge as something everybody saw happen, and all would be lost.

This musing fully occupied her as she trudged along the narrow paths dividing the rows of young coffee trees, and climbed the slope to the banana plantation which formed a deep border to Yosefu's compound. She was breathless by the time the house was in view, and she was compelled to rest for several minutes before she could warble the alarm with suitable gusto. The slight delay was worth the trouble. Nantondo could not have dreamed of a better response.

Miriamu, Yosefu's wife, and her three daughters, left the supper to burn itself dry in the pots, the two servants abandoned the hens they had been trying to pen up for the night, whilst Yosefu himself and his old Kibuka, rushed from the verandah and surrounded the dishevelled old woman who yelled madly and practically rolled in the dust at their feet. To the casual observer, it would have been noticeable how quickly her energy returned in response to the shrill chorus of questions, but Nantondo was thoroughly enjoying the element of suspense and played for time by clutching the hem of Yosefu's snow-white *kanzu*² with her somewhat grimy hand and moaning unintelligibly.

'Tell us, woman, what has happened?' Yosefu's imagination ranged wildly from crop slashing by political enemies to mass murder in the village.

'Yes, Nantondo, tell us quickly what is the matter.' In her agitation Miriamu roughly shook the old woman's shoulder and her three plump daughters wriggled with excitement and chorused, 'Tell us, tell us.'

The two servants, mere boys, not wishing to be left out of things, but not daring to appear forward before the master, brooked a compromise by chasing round the compound and warbling the alarm in high-pitched voices, to the acute dismay of the hens who cackled furiously and finally scuttled for cover in the plantain grove.

Only old Kibuka retained a modicum of calm. Primarily because he loved to pose as the local cynic and man of the world, but secretly because he had never forgiven Nantondo the humiliation he had suffered when she had publicly disclosed that he dyed his hair in order to appear younger, thus deceiving the authorities into continuing his employment as a clerk at the Ggombolola Headquarters long after retirement age.

'Let us not get excited,' he admonished, making an attempt to draw Yosefu back to the verandah, but Nantondo, ever quick to scent a potential killjoy, decided to play her trump card. 'Witchcraft!' she yelled, and darted with unsuspected agility back through the plantains, where the

poor hens, startled by this sudden intrusion, set up a fresh outcry and flapped clumsily back into the compound.

Everybody followed Nantondo. It was the word 'witchcraft' that gave rise to the truth. Having lain dormant in the tribal language for so very long, it produced a delicious, chilly tingle down the spine, and filled minds with at least a hundred exciting speculations when it was at last proclaimed in the true rich fullness of its dramatic sense.

Even Kibuka joined the straggling procession which skidded and slipped down the narrow, slimy path between the plantains. The women managed well on their nimble, bare feet, but Yosefu and Kibuka, with *kanzus* held beyond reach of the treacherous mud, mentally cursed their shoes and hobbled as fast as their protesting corns would allow.

At the bottom of the hill, the two servant boys abandoned the chase in order to spread the alarm in the far corners of the village, which was hardly necessary since the noise created by Nantondo and Yosefu's womenfolk had echoed lustily across the valley, bringing people streaming forth to join them. By the time Damieno's house was reached, Nantondo was leading an army nearly a hundred strong, many of them armed to the teeth.

The house, really a tumbled down shack of mud and wattle, appeared to be deserted, and for a few minutes the crowd stood in awkward silence, about a hundred feet away, looking rather sheepish and wondering what had brought them there. Then they heard the blood-chilling moan that had sent Nantondo scurrying to safety. 'Witchcraft,' she again screamed, at this psychological moment, and the gratifying effect was to see her neighbours flee for their lives or tremble visibly.

In the ensuing silence, the more courageous bombarded her with questions, and to satisfy the general curiosity, she hopped on to an ancient log and explained, with a great deal of miming and exaggeration, what she had seen happen.

The sun had already withdrawn its last rays behind the surrounding hills, and the brief, African twilight shed its insinuating mantle over everything, throwing into sharp relief each bough and leaf, endowing every stone with a story. In this setting Nantondo's meandering tale uprooted long-forgotten superstitions, together with memories of the ancient practices of mystic sects. The word 'witchcraft' rolled reverently from every tongue, savoured with the enjoyment reserved for some specially luscious, forbidden fruit. Somebody produced a drum and beat it steadily to keep evil spirits at bay. The atmosphere was rank with hysteria.

Noting with horror the turn things were taking, Yosefu hastily despatched a young boy to the Ggombolola Chief's home, with a verbal message that the whole village was going crazy, and when the boy had gone, he, with some difficulty, dislodged Nantondo from the log, where she was engaged in chanting a dose of anti-spell, and tried to make the people see how their behaviour was only serving to aggravate Damieno's situation. 'Don't you realise,' he pleaded, 'if the man believes himself to

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be bewitched all this noise will strengthen that belief, whereas we as Christians know that there is no such thing as a spell. It is to us to convince Damieno that only God has the power over life and death.'

'But he is bewitched,' said a man nearby, and as another chilling cry rent the air, 'listen to his anguish. The spell must have been very powerful indeed.'

The crowd nodded in agreement, and the drummer renewed his efforts with more enthusiasm. Yosefu glanced in despair at Kibuka, and Kibuka, too, shook his head. 'My old friend,' he said, 'your words fall on stony ground. The awful thing is that they are actually enjoying themselves. Damieno has ceased to be a neighbour, a friend, or simply a person – at the moment he is nothing more than a sensation.'

Yosefu's dismay increased when, as darkness fell, and the night insects began their rhythmic songs, Damieno's groans transformed themselves into choking grunts. They were clearly audible, despite the throbbing of the drum. However, as soon as word circulated that the Ggombolola Chief had been called, a vast number of the crowd discreetly melted away – but not far enough to miss anything; most of them had climbed into trees, from where they obtained a bird's-eye view of the scene. It simply was not wise to encounter the Chief and his *askaris*³ if you were unable to produce a tax ticket for the current year. The women, girls and young boys who remained, joined Nantondo in her monotonous chant, and shuffled steadily around the drum. This was the sight that greeted the Ggombolola Chief when his Landrover roared to a halt.

'My God, what a performance,' were his first words as he leaped from the driving seat and glanced impatiently at the people who sank to their knees in the presence of the *Kabaka's* authority. 'What on earth is going on here?'

Nantondo was determined to continue running the show, although the Chief held no high place in her estimation, and she ran to him to give the details, but he shrugged her off without ceremony, and turned abruptly to Yosefu. 'I believe it was you, Sir, who sent for me, and the boy has given me a garbled story of spells and witchcraft which seems senseless. Would you care to let me have the facts?'

Yosefu briefly related all he knew of the matter, wondering vaguely how this new school of Chief would deal with things. By traditional standards, the Chief did not carry any aura of authority. To begin with he was much too young and slight to evince immediate respect. His face was as smooth and round as a schoolboy's and he seemed oddly ill at ease in a *kanzu*, whilst his tweed jacket with its leather-patched elbows was decidedly shabby. Even the eyes behind the thick spectacles were more questing than shrewd. Looking at him, Yosefu felt the last vestige of optimism drain away, and his voice was anxious when he asked, 'What do you think should be done?'

'Well,' replied the Chief, groping in the glove compartment of his Landrover for an electric torch, 'quite obviously I shall have to try to get

him out. It would take tear-gas to remove this crowd. Anyway, do you want to come with me?"

'I should like to come, too,' Kibuka put in, so the three of them stalked purposefully towards Damieno's house.

Immediately, the women sent up trilling cries, whether in applause of their bravery or for fear of their lives, was not at all clear, and Nantondo screamed, 'The spell, beware of the spell.' This slogan was taken up by even the tree dwellers, until it developed into a chant - 'Beware the Spell.'

The Chief stopped, suddenly turned on his heel, and roared to the two *askaris* lounging against the Landrover, 'Arrest the next person who dares to say a word.' The effect was indeed magical. Everybody was astounded that so boyish a figure could summon such a thunderous bellow: the more timid were even afraid to breathe.

'That must be the so-called spell on the doorstep,' the Chief remarked, as they continued their way. 'Whatever it is, it stinks.'

'It seems to be moving,' remarked Kibuka, and all three leaned forward as the torch's beam spotlighted the whole of Damieno's doorway. Yosefu had left his spectacles at home, but the stench caused him to cover his nose and mouth with his handkerchief. 'What can it be?' he asked. The Chief replied with brutal frankness, 'Excrement and worms. What an unholy mess.'

Quickly they moved away from the nauseating mixture and went to the back of the house where a small, wooden shutter covered the hole that served as the only window. Since their approach, Damieno had ceased to howl, but they could hear him panting with fear at the sound of their voices.

'One thing I think you ought to know, before you try to get him out,' Kibuka whispered, putting a restraining hand on the Chief who was about to approach the aperture, 'the boy is so sure that he is bewitched, he is quite likely to drop dead the very moment he leaves the house.'

The Chief nodded thoughtfully and then murmured, 'In that case, I had better try to get inside.'

A few gentle taps on the shutter sent poor Damieno into babbling hysterics, and only after the Chief repeatedly called his name in a soft, crooning voice did the storm inside subside. When it was apparent that Damieno was in a fit state to listen despite an occasional sob, the Chief disclosed his identity and said he had come to help him. Damieno remained listening until the Chief suggested that he be admitted through the door, whereupon he cried, 'No! It is death to open the door.' All the Chief's coaxing and wheedling were to no avail, and his brow was damp with sweat as he glanced helplessly at Yosefu and Kibuka.

'Damieno, listen!' Yosefu spoke softly but clearly through the shutter. 'This is Yosefu Mukasa. You know me well. You have helped me harvest my coffee many times. And I - haven't I always treated you well?'

For the first time Damieno spoke in an almost natural tone. 'Yes, Sir.'

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know you have been very kind to me.'

'And so,' Yosefu continued, 'you trust me, don't you? You know I would always treat you fairly?'

'Yes,' agreed Damieno, 'I trust you, Sir.'

'Then, if you cannot open the door, you would not be afraid if I came through this small window, and seeing that I am your friend, you would be willing to help me?'

There was a breathless pause before Damieno finally whispered, 'Yes, Sir, I would help you.'

To get Yosefu through the small hole which served as a window, after Damieno had released the inner bolt, was not an easy matter, for not only was he of more than average height, but he was also of hefty build. He came dangerously near to being stuck half-way, and was only saved from this embarrassing predicament when Damieno sufficiently overcame his terror to tug at Yosefu's head and shoulders, whilst the Chief and Kibuka pushed relentlessly at his nether parts. By the time all of him was inside the house, his *kanzu* hung in filthy shreds and his shoulders and hips felt raw and dislocated.

But there was little time to think of physical discomfort, for immediately Damieno, who was kneeling before him, poured out his full terror in a series of incoherent prayers, recited in a mad mixture of his own language and Luganda. The light from the Chief's torch shone on the abject figure, accentuating the wild, rolling eyes, and foam-flecked lips. Yosefu, clutching frantically at his own sanity, found himself praying too.

'I'm joining you,' the Chief exclaimed, and with his *kanzu* rolled up round his chest, he scrambled into the room, revealing to Yosefu's horror a pair of brief khaki shorts. His appearance caused Damieno to roll on the dusty floor of the house and then grab Yosefu by the knees.

Apart from a small truckle bed, a roughly made table and camp stool, there was no furniture, so the Chief, indifferent to Damieno's behaviour, offered the stool to Yosefu and sat himself on the grubby blanket covering the bed. Kibuka was content to watch the scene from the window.

'Now then, Damieno,' the Chief's voice was suddenly, surprisingly firm. 'Who was the person who put this spell on you, and why did he do so?'

Damieno continued to gibber idiotically for some time, but under Yosefu's gentle coaxing he gradually told his story.

It transpired that the caster of the spell was not a witch doctor, but the nephew of one of these clever gentlemen, and he had arrived in Buganda to work on a large coffee farm belonging to a rich man in the neighbouring village. Finding his role of a labourer frustrating, he had planned to rob his employer, and demanded that Damieno should help him. When Damieno had refused, the witch doctor's nephew had first threatened him with physical injury and finally with the death spell. Hence the present excitement.

The Chief knew the rich coffee farmer in the next village and he asked Kibuka, who had been listening avidly, to tell the *askaris* to drive over

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and collect the spell-caster, whose name happened to be Okidi. These instructions sent Damieno into another seizure of hysteria and the uncontrollable chattering of his teeth set everybody's nerves on edge.

'Stop it, man,' cried the Chief irritably, 'we are going to prove to you that this filth outside your door can do you no harm, unless you are stupid enough to eat it.' But Damieno continued to shake and moan until, ten minutes later, he fell into an exhausted stupor across Yosefu's lap.

To help pass the time until the *askaris* returned with Okidi, Yosefu answered many questions on witchcraft, and found himself relating tales he had heard as a boy, as well as mysterious incidents which had occurred in the district. The Chief took out a stubby pipe from the pocket of his shabby jacket, and listened with deep interest as he puffed away. Once or twice he recounted things he had heard from his grandmother in his home county of Buyaga, and was delighted when Yosefu said that he had known the old lady well before her marriage. From then onwards, the talk turned to family ties, with both men taking enjoyment in tracing the intricate lines which gave them a distant kinship.

The spontaneous uproar occurring when the *askaris* returned with Okidi, whom Nantondo immediately recognised as the culprit, brought Yosefu and the Chief back to reality with something of a shock, and sent poor Damieno into a convulsive fit. Leaving Yosefu to cope with the victim who writhed and gasped on the floor, the Chief once more hopped through the window and sprinted towards the Landrover before Nantondo and her harpies could tear Okidi to pieces. Throwing discretion to the winds, the people in the trees descended from their refuge, each armed with strong branches, and they proceeded to aim as many blows as possible at the squat Okidi as he cowered between the *askaris*. In trying to shield him, the Chief received a resounding thump across the shoulders, and only with a superhuman effort did he manage to make himself heard above the howling mob. It was useless to appeal to their civic pride, so he merely shouted, 'Do you want to kill this man before he removes his so-called spell from Damieno? Is this village to have two funerals in one day? Stand back, in the name of the *Kabaka*.'

'Make him remove the spell,' bawled back the erstwhile tree-dwellers. They had grown bored with hanging about, and were now impatient for some positive action.

'All right,' the Chief cried, 'I shall make him remove the spell - but only on condition that my *askaris* are allowed to put him in the Ggombolola prison straight afterwards.'

As the mob roared its approval, the Chief borrowed a gun from one of the *askaris* and marched the hapless Okidi to Damieno's door. 'Pick up that mess,' he commanded, prodding Okidi's ribs with the barrel of the gun. Okidi was fastly approaching Damieno's jellyfish state, and he quivered with fright when the gun nudged him once more. For a moment it seemed that he would rather die than touch the obnoxious banana leaf,

then he slowly bent forward, lifted the thing with both hands and retraced his steps, carrying it as far away from his nose as possible. A wild *hulululating*⁴ came from the crowd and the drum started up again as the spell was laid in the back of the Landrover and Okidi was handcuffed between the two *askaris* before they drove away.

During the excitement, Kibuka had kept close to the Chief but now he missed him, supposing him to have gone back to Damieno's house. Kibuka turned that way only to discover the Chief being violently sick behind a tree. 'Now what?' he asked as soon as the younger man had regained his composure.

'Well, now, I suppose we must persuade Damieno that it is safe for him to come out.'

'That should be easy.'

The two of them entered the house through the doorway, for Yosefu had found the key, and Damieno was past caring. 'I'm afraid we shan't get him out.' Yosefu met them with an expression of anxiety. 'He says the power of the spell is still there.'

The Chief closed the door against the people who had drifted near the house to see how Damieno was faring, and approached the low bed where Damieno lay with his face to the wall. 'Wake up, Damieno,' he said, giving the figure a friendly shake. 'Everything is all right now. Okidi is on his way to prison.'

Damieno responded by rolling on his back and staring vacantly up at the sagging grass roof. 'But, Sir, don't you understand?' he said, 'the power of the spell is still there. I shall die the moment my foot passes outside this hut.'

'You won't die. Do you hear me? You won't die.' The Chief experienced a spasm of annoyance when the luminous dial of his watch revealed that he had missed the nine o'clock news. 'For God's sake, man, pull yourself together. I give you my word that nothing will harm you if you leave this place with me now.' Damieno gazed in despair at Yosefu whose bulk was balancing precariously on the tiny stool. 'Nobody understands,' he muttered.

The Chief tried again. 'Look! This is a Christian kingdom, and from your name I imagine that you too are a Christian. We all know that the power of the cross is stronger than any man's magic. If Yosefu gives you the crucifix he is wearing around his neck, will you have sufficient faith to step outside?'

Yosefu eagerly removed his cross and chain, but Damieno wearily shook his head. 'I know this magic. It can kill even Christians.'

'Shall I send for the Reverend?' suggested Kibuka. 'I see the Landrover has come back for you.'

'I doubt if he could help,' the Chief answered, and began pacing the floor, so that the beam from his torch fluttered fitfully around the gloomy room as if to illustrate the extent of his restlessness.

'Well,' Kibuka's silhouette shifted hesitantly as he said this, 'the only

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remedy that I can think of is to produce another witch doctor who can satisfy Damieno that the spell has been removed.'

The Chief stopped pacing in order to glance at Kibuka who blinked bravely into the beam of light shining directly at him, and harshly demanded, 'Are you serious? And what do you suppose would happen afterwards? I'll tell you. The whole village would start practising the old tricks, and the witch doctors would be ruling the place.'

'But we must do something,' cried Yosefu, 'or the widow Nantondo will be poking her nose in here and telling the crowd that the spell worked.'

'Leave me to die,' Damieno mumbled sleepily, but the Chief yelled at him, 'Stand up, you fool,' and when Damieno ignored the command he seized him roughly by the scruff of the neck and hauled him to his feet. 'Let me die,' Damieno murmured again, trying to sink back upon the bed.

'Oh, you idiot,' groaned the Chief in absolute despair, and with it escaped the last shred of patience. A split second later saw his fist flash through the air, and Damieno fell with a sickening thud to the ground. At that precise moment Nantondo shrilled hysterically over Kibuka's shoulder, 'Damieno is dead.' The cry was swiftly taken up by the mob behind her, and soon the air was vibrant with traditional lamentations of the women. Dead or alive, there was every likelihood of Damieno being buried at sunrise.

As the moonlight stole with shyness into the hut, Kibuka and Yosefu exchanged glances of exasperation. It seemed to both of them that today's young people were determined to learn the difficult way.

'I didn't mean to hit him quite so hard,' the Chief muttered apologetically, and then added, 'Unlock the door. I think I had better take him along to the dispensary.' Yosefu obligingly opened the door, and was amazed to see how easily the Chief threw Damieno across his slender shoulders and carried him through the frantic crowd to the Landrover.

There he was confronted by Nantondo, who, flushed with her recent success, screamed: 'Into the bush; bewitched bodies must lie in the bush.' The Chief's reply was a single, rude word which, regrettably, he had found in common use at Oxford and with that he dumped poor Damieno in the back of the vehicle, jumped into the driving seat and drove off.

At the dispensary, four miles away, the Medical Assistant in Charge was busily concocting a letter to the Ministry of Health explaining why his small stock of medicinal brandy needed frequent replenishment, but he gladly left this delicate job when the Chief arrived with Damieno. Because he knew the Chief, he was perfectly satisfied to be given a brief outline of the events leading to Damieno's present predicament, without mention of the blow. Slight concussion was the verdict after an examination, so Damieno was tucked into one of the three beds and the Chief allowed to sit near him until he should recover consciousness.

It wasn't long before the patient opened his eyes and gave the strange room his puzzled scrutiny. Almost at once the Chief addressed him in

tones of forced heartiness. 'Well, Damieno, here you are safe and sound with nothing in the world to worry you. The spell was simply a bad joke, after all. We left your place without a hair on your head coming to harm. Poor Okidi must be feeling a complete fool.'

Damieno received this news with a kind of sleepy comprehension and asked, 'Where am I now?'

The Chief chuckled, 'You are in Bulega Dispensary, and I am sure the man in charge won't mind if you spend the rest of the night in that comfortable bed.'

'Good,' whispered Damieno, and fell fast asleep.

The short drive back from the dispensary to the Chief's house adjoining the Ggombolola Headquarters was a pleasant journey, along a rough winding road, gleaming silver from the high moon and partly lined by slender plantains whose highly polished trunks presented delicate patterns of reflection. Once a mongoose scurried into a ditch, and an owl swept silently overhead, but otherwise it seemed life was at a standstill. This pervading peace, combined with the great relief he felt about Damieno, caused the Chief's spirits to soar, and in keeping with his mood, the *askaris* beside him vented their good humour by joking about the antics of the crowd which had collected at Damieno's house. They were still roaring with laughter about the reactions of the Ggombolola jailer when he had been asked to preserve the spell as evidence, as they braked at the Chief's door.

Yosefu and Kibuka were waiting in the sitting-room, anxious to hear news of Damieno and their relief, too, was boundless when they learned he was not seriously hurt. Yosefu thanked God repeatedly, but Kibuka shook his head gravely and said, 'Well, boy, let this be a lesson to you. Never again strike a man in anger.' The Chief hurriedly agreed that he had acted hastily, but couldn't refrain from adding that everything had turned out for the best eventually. He then called for beer, and over long cool drinks they leisurely discussed the night's events and the possible repercussions.

'I suppose Okidi will get at least six months?' Kibuka speculated.

The Chief fumbled with his pipe, and replied, 'Probably more, if he is convicted. Naturally, this type of case has to be heard in Mengo and not in the Ggombolola Court. The idea is a bit inconvenient so far as the witnesses are concerned, but on the other hand it might be dangerous to even put the man in the dock here.'

Both the older men nodded their heads in agreement, but further conversation was interrupted by an angry babble outside where a large faction of the crowd that had formerly gathered at Damieno's had come to claim the body. The Chief finished his beer at a gulp before striding purposefully on to the verandah. There was a sudden silence as he appeared, and when the two *askaris* emerged, fully armed, from their quarters, many people remembered urgent appointments elsewhere.

'You call for the body?' the Chief's tone was ironical and the brave few

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who murmured assent sounded decidedly unconvinced. 'Well,' he continued, 'there is no body - because Damieno is not yet dead!' This announcement brought forth a general gasp of astonishment, but Nantondo who was, of course, well in front, shouted: 'If that is so, then let us see him.'

The Chief raised a mocking eyebrow and politely inquired, 'Since when have you been the *Kabaka*, Madam?' meaning who was she to issue orders, and was rewarded with several hoots of laughter from the male members in the crowd.

'I may not be the *Kabaka*,' Nantondo flung back, 'but I am old enough to be your grandmother and entitled to your respect, Sir. Now be a good fellow and bring forth Damieno so that we might see he is alive.'

Again there were sounds of mirth but it was quickly stifled when the Chief looked stern and said, 'I think we have all had enough entertainment tonight. Now listen, Damieno is not dead, and he was in no way affected by the so-called spell. But he was badly frightened and needs plenty of rest. He needs to be perfectly well, so that he can go up to Mengo when Okidi is tried for dabbling in witchcraft...'

Cries of 'Try him here' and 'Why Mengo?' interrupted him, but he waved them to silence, and went on. 'The case will be heard in Mengo because it must go before the Principal Court - and what difference does it make to you people now that Damieno has suffered no harm?'

'Where is he? Where is he?' The clamour rose to a chant, and the Chief realised they would not be easily satisfied. Catching sight of Nantondo's crafty old face, he beckoned her to him, and giving way to sudden inspiration he drew her out of the crowd's earshot and said, 'Nantondo, why are they making all this fuss?'

She replied: 'Because it is a village affair, and we want to see that Okidi gets what he deserves.'

'But he will get his deserts in Mengo, whatever they may be.'

'How can we be sure? He may charm them into believing him innocent.'

'But Nantondo, how can he do that if you are there as the chief witness?'

Nantondo paused until the full significance of this idea had settled in her mind. 'You mean I shall have to go to Mengo too?'

The Chief nodded, 'Yes, you will have to go, I am afraid, because the big Judge up there will want to know exactly what happened, and you will have to stand up in Court and tell him.'

'Is it like the Ggombolola Court?'

'Heavens, no! Mengo Court is larger than the entire Ggombolola Headquarters. You know that cases from all over Buganda are tried there.'

Nantondo could hardly believe her ears. Her rare trips to Mengo had been as one of the crowd on such public holidays as the *Kabaka's* birthday, but here was a chance for her to shine on her own. They said the *Kabaka* always liked to know what was going on in the village: if she per-

formed well enough in Court, it was quite likely he would invite her to the palace to hear the story at first hand. And it was a foregone conclusion that her picture would be in the newspapers. Quite obviously, the situation presented endless possibilities.

Still, being feminine to the last, she refrained from committing herself fully until she had asked: 'But what will I do for money? I am only a poor woman, you know. These are the only clothes I possess.'

The Chief hastened to assure her that the Government would provide transport, and that if the case was prolonged, as it would probably be, she could stay with his sister who was a nurse at Namirembe Mission. 'I shall ask her to find a nice *busuti*⁵ for you,' he added, 'and you and Damieno can travel up together.' Nantondo beamed with delight and mentally reviewed all her previous opinions of the Chief. The old one would have told her to borrow a *busuti* from one of her neighbours.

Now that the bait was well and truly swallowed, the Chief found it expedient to point out where these wonderful plans might go wrong. 'If the villagers cause too much trouble, it may be necessary to ask Mengo to send a Judge here, then, of course, there will be no reason for you to leave the village.' Nantondo's mouth tightened. 'Leave them to me,' she said, and went towards the people who were stirring uneasily beyond the verandah.

A few short words sufficed to change the grumbling into cheers of approval and then everybody drifted off home. Nantondo had told them that the Chief wanted the day of trial to be a public holiday in Kalasanda, so that as many people as possible could attend court. It seemed a brilliant stroke, but hardly in accordance with Government standing orders, and the Chief himself privately prayed that his *Ssaza*⁶ Chief would not hear of it.



The story really ends at that point although, so far as Kalasanda was concerned, it continued over a period of months and is still commonly referred to as 'Our Case' whenever conversation takes, what you might call, a legal turn.

Nantondo's visit to Mengo, which lasted two full days, and from which she returned resplendent in a new, pale green *busuti* with a brocade sash, is an event she will probably go on describing until the end of her days. Unfortunately, the *Kabaka* was away hunting, but the Chief's sister very kindly took her to the palace to visit another old lady who lived there, and she was able to take a quick peep inside the royal apartments. Her appearance in court was, as everyone agreed, a complete triumph.

Damieno who really should have shone the brightest, was relegated to the role of supporting cast. He received neither more nor less attention than had been his lot prior to his bewitchment, and because he was such a simple soul this was just the way he liked things to be.

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The case dragged on for two months before the villain of the piece, Okidi, was finally sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment and ultimate banishment from the Kingdom, but during the proceedings there was one nasty moment, and that was the discrepancy as to how Damieno acquired slight concussion and the bruises on his chin and head. Yosefu and Kibuka quailed at the thought of committing perjury, but neither of them would say they saw the Chief strike Damieno. Luckily for them, Nantondo had no qualms in stating firmly that she had been at the window when Damieno had fallen heavily to the ground, 'as though stricken by the hand of God'.

It was a most impressive moment for everybody.

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

• Revision questions

- 1 Using your own words, describe what Nantondo looks like.
- 2 What is the significance of witchcraft among these people?
- 3 Describe the geographical as well as the social setting of the story.
- 4 Kibuka said of Damieno, he 'has ceased to be a neighbour, a friend or simply a person – at the moment he is nothing more than a sensation'.
Attempt a description of what you think this means.
- 5 How did the older villagers of Kalasanda, like Mukasa and Kibuka, view the Chief?
- 6 Describe the characters of the Chief and Yosefu Mukasa. Which of the two shows more maturity?
- 7 Tell the story of the spell-caster, Okidi, as Damieno must have told it.
- 8 Would you say Christianity was deeply rooted among these people? Give reasons for your answer.
- 9 Describe the relationship between the villagers and the Chief.
- 10 Who is the 'Kabaka' and why is he held in such high esteem?

• Topics for discussion

- 1 Without Nantondo's gossiping nature there wouldn't be a story. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 2 People like Nantondo can be a menace but at the same time useful to society. How true is this statement?
- 3 What is witchcraft? Should we encourage it in our midst?
- 4 Who between Nantondo and the Chief do you think could not have done without the other?
- 5 Kimenye treats an otherwise sad situation in a very humorous way. Give four examples of humorous situations.
- 6 Crisis brings people closer. Is this true of 'The bewitching of Damieno'?

Tayeb Salih •

A handful of dates — desert fruit.

TAYEB SALIH has said that he had to overcome great obstacles to become a writer. He grew up in a farming community under strict religious authority where writing and reading were not encouraged – he had few role models, and few books to read to inspire him. Nevertheless, he was determined to educate himself, and succeeded at school. He then attended the University of Khartoum, and studied further in England. On returning to Sudan, Salih taught for a while and then turned to drama, becoming the head of BBC drama programming in Arabic. He began writing fiction in 1953, with *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*, which was not published until 1968. His novel of the following year, *Season of Migration to the North*, has been described as a modern *Tales of the Arabian Nights*. He now works for UNESCO.

Salih was born in 1929 in al-Debba, central Sudan. The story that follows – ‘*A handful of dates*’ – is taken from his early collection of stories, and describes a rural experience of disillusion and awakening in a young boy’s life.

I must have been very young at the time. While I don’t remember exactly how old I was, I do remember that when people saw me with my grandfather they would pat me on the head and give my cheek a pinch – things they didn’t do to my grandfather. The strange thing was that I never used to go out with my father, rather it was my grandfather who would take me with him wherever he went, except for the mornings when I would go to the mosque to learn the Koran. The mosque, the river and the fields – these were the landmarks in our life. While most of the children of my age grumbled at having to go to the mosque to learn the Koran, I used to love it. The reason was, no doubt, that I was quick at learning by heart and the Sheikh always asked me to stand up and recite the *Chapter of the Merciful* whenever we had visitors, who

would pat me on my head and cheek just as people did when they saw me with my grandfather.

Yes, I used to love the mosque, and I loved the river too. Directly we finished our Koran reading in the morning I would throw down my wooden slate and dart off, quick as a genie, to my mother, hurriedly swallow down my breakfast, and run off for a plunge in the river. When tired of swimming about I would sit on the bank and gaze at the strip of water that wound away eastwards and hid behind a thick wood of acacia trees. I loved to give rein to my imagination and picture to myself a tribe of giants living behind that wood, a people tall and thin with white beards and sharp noses, like my grandfather. Before my grandfather ever replied to my many questions he would rub the tip of his nose with his forefinger; as for his beard, it was soft and luxuriant and as white as cotton-wool – never in my life have I seen anything of a purer whiteness or greater beauty. My grandfather must also have been extremely tall, for I never saw anyone in the whole area address him without having to look up at him, nor did I see him enter a house without having to bend so low that I was put in mind of the way the river wound round behind the wood of acacia trees. I loved him and would imagine myself, when I grew to be a man, tall and slender like him, walking along with great strides.

I believe I was his favourite grandchild: no wonder, for my cousins were a stupid bunch and I – so they say – was an intelligent child. I used to know when my grandfather wanted me to laugh, when to be silent; also I would remember the times for his prayers and would bring him his prayer-rug and fill the ewer for his ablutions without his having to ask me. When he had nothing else to do he enjoyed listening to me reciting to him from the Koran in a lilting voice, and I could tell from his face that he was moved.

One day I asked him about our neighbour Masood. I said to my grandfather: 'I fancy you don't like our neighbour Masood?'

To which he answered, having rubbed the tip of his nose: 'He's an indolent man and I don't like such people.'

I said to him: 'What's an indolent man?'

My grandfather lowered his head for a moment, then looking across at the wide expanse of field, he said: 'Do you see it stretching out from the edge of the desert up to the Nile bank? A hundred *feddans*.¹ Do you see all those date palms? And those trees – sant, acacia, and sayal? All this fell into Masood's lap, was inherited by him from his father.'

Taking advantage of the silence that had descended upon my grandfather, I turned my gaze from him to the vast area defined by his words. 'I don't care,' I told myself, 'who owns those date palms, those trees or this black, cracked earth – all I know is that it's the arena for my dreams and my playground.'

My grandfather then continued: 'Yes, my boy, forty years ago all this belonged to Masood – two-thirds of it is now mine.'

This was news to me for I had imagined that the land had belonged to my grandfather ever since God's Creation.

'I didn't own a single *feddan* when I first set foot in this village. Masood was then the owner of all these riches. The position has changed now, though, and I think that before Allah calls to Him I shall have bought the remaining third as well.'

I do not know why it was I felt fear at my grandfather's words – and pity for our neighbour Masood. How I wished my grandfather wouldn't do what he'd said! I remembered Masood's singing, his beautiful voice and powerful laugh that resembled the gurgling of water. My grandfather never used to laugh.

I asked my grandfather why Masood had sold his land.

'Women,' and from the way my grandfather pronounced the word I felt that 'women' was something terrible. 'Masood, my boy, was a much-married man. Each time he married he sold me a *feddan* or two.' I made the quick calculation that Masood must have married some ninety women. Then I remembered his three wives, his shabby appearance, his lame donkey and its dilapidated saddle, his *djellaba*² with the torn sleeves. I had all but rid my mind of the thoughts that jostled in it when I saw the man approaching us, and my grandfather and I exchanged glances.

'We'll be harvesting the dates today,' said Masood. 'Don't you want to be there?'

I felt, though, that he did not really want my grandfather to attend. My grandfather, however, jumped to his feet and I saw that his eyes sparkled momentarily with an intense brightness. He pulled me by the hand and we went off to the harvesting of Masood's dates.

Someone brought my grandfather a stool covered with an ox-hide, while I remained standing. There was a vast number of people there, but though I knew them all, I found myself for some reason, watching Masood: aloof from the great gathering of people he stood as though it were no concern of his, despite the fact that the date palms to be harvested were his own. Sometimes his attention would be caught by the sound of a huge clump of dates crashing down from on high. Once he shouted up at the boy perched on the very summit of the date palm who had begun hacking at a clump with his long, sharp sickle: 'Be careful you don't cut the heart of the palm.'

No-one paid any attention to what he said and the boy seated at the very summit of the date palm continued, quickly and energetically, to work away at the branch with his sickle till the clump of dates began to drop like something descending from the heavens.

I, however, had begun to think about Masood's phrase 'the heart of the palm'. I pictured the palm tree as something with feeling, something possessed of a heart that throbbed. I remembered Masood's remark to me

A handful of dates

when he had once seen me playing about with the branch of a young palm tree: 'Palm trees, my boy, like humans, experience joy and suffering.' And I had felt an inward and unreasoned embarrassment.

When I again looked at the expanse of ground stretching before me I saw my young companions swarming like ants around the trunks of the palm trees, gathering up dates and eating most of them. The dates were collected into high mounds. I saw people coming along and weighing them into measuring bins and pouring them into sacks, of which I counted thirty. The crowd of people broke up, except for Hussein the merchant, Mousa the owner of the field next to ours on the east, and two men I'd never seen before.

I heard a low whistling sound and saw that my grandfather had fallen asleep. Then I noticed that Masood had not changed his stance, except that he had placed a stalk in his mouth and was munching at it like someone surfeited with food who doesn't know what to do with the mouthful he still has.

Suddenly my grandfather woke up, jumped to his feet and walked towards the sacks of dates. He was followed by Hussein the merchant, Mousa the owner of the field next to ours, and the two strangers. I glanced at Masood and saw that he was making his way towards us with extreme slowness, like a man who wants to retreat but whose feet insist on going forward. They formed a circle round the sacks of dates and began examining them, some taking a date or two to eat. My grandfather gave me a fistful, which I began munching. I saw Masood filling the palms of both hands with dates and bringing them up close to his nose, then returning them.

Then I saw them dividing up the sacks between them. Hussein the merchant took ten; each of the strangers took five. Mousa the owner of the field next to ours on the eastern side took five, and my grandfather took five. Understanding nothing, I looked at Masood and saw that his eyes were darting about to left and right like two mice that have lost their way home.

'You're still fifty pounds in debt to me,' said my grandfather to Masood. 'We'll talk about it later.'

Hussein called his assistants and they brought along donkeys, the two strangers produced camels, and the sacks of dates were loaded on to them. One of the donkeys let out a braying which set the camels frothing at the mouth and complaining noisily. I felt myself drawing close to Masood, felt my hand stretch out towards him as though I wanted to touch the hem of his garment. I heard him make a noise in his throat like the rasping of a lamb being slaughtered. For some unknown reason, I experienced a sharp sensation of pain in my chest.

I ran off into the distance. Hearing my grandfather call after me, I hesitated a little, then continued on my way. I felt at that moment that I hated him. Quickening my pace, it was as though I carried with me a secret I wanted to rid myself of. I reached the river bank near the bend it made behind the wood of acacia trees. Then, without knowing why, I put my finger into my throat and spewed up the dates I'd eaten.

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

♦ Revision questions

- 1 Compare and contrast the characters of the narrator and his grandfather.
- 2 How is the narrator different from the other children?
- 3 How do you think Masood lost his lands and crop of dates to other people?
- 4 Discuss the theme of exploitation and oppression in this story.
- 5 a) What role does the date palm tree play in the lives of the people?
b) What does it symbolise?
- 6 What effect does the noise of the donkeys and camels have on what is happening at that moment in the story?
- 7 a) Why did the narrator experience 'a sharp sensation of pain' after seeing how Masood was treated?
b) Why does the narrator love going to the river?

♦ Topics for discussion

- 1 'Indebtedness is slavery'. Discuss.
- 2 Greed makes people insensitive and uncaring. Is this true of the narrator's grandfather?
- 3 What is achieved by having a child tell the story?

GLOSSARY

- 1 *feddan*: an area of land approximately 4000 sq. m.
- 2 *djellaba*: an Arab robe with long sleeves.

E. B. Dongala

The man

E. B. DONGALA is a Professor of Chemistry who has taught both in Europe and in his home country, the Congo. He wrote his first novel in French in 1973. It was called *Un fusil dans la main, un Poème dans la poche* (A gun in your hand, a poem in your pocket) and shows Dongala's talent, not only as a politically committed writer, but a great satirist – someone who can stand back and see the ironies and humour in life. In 1982 he published a serious yet lightly written collection of short stories, *Jazz et Palme du Vin* (Jazz and Palm Wine) from which this story is taken. The collection was banned in his own country, but has been widely read elsewhere.

'The man' is written in a satirical style – light-hearted language, comic in tone – yet the underlying subject matter is deadly serious. The men in the story are caricatures – cartoon figures – whose exaggerated actions highlight the terror of the regime in his country. 'The man' becomes a symbol of resistance to this oppression, and dies as a sacrifice for the people he represents.

— No, this time he won't get away! After forty-eight hours, he had been tracked down, his itinerary was known and the village where he was hiding identified. But how many false leads there had been! He had been seen everywhere at once, as if he had the gift of ubiquity: dedicated militants had apparently run him down in the heart of the country without, however, managing to capture him: a patrol which had been parachuted into the northern swamps claimed they had badly wounded him, providing as their only proof traces of blood that disappeared into a ravine; frontier guards swore they had shot him in a canoe (which had unfortunately sunk) as he tried to escape by river: none of these claims survived closer investigation. The already tight police net was tightened still further, new brigades of gendarmes were created, and the army was given

carte blanche.¹ Soldiers invaded the working-class quarters of the city, breaking down the doors of houses, sticking bayonets into mattresses filled with grass and cotton, slashing open sacks of *foo-foo*,² beating with their rifle butts anyone who didn't answer their questions quickly enough, or quite simply cutting down anyone who dared to protest at the violation of his home. But all these strong-arm tactics achieved nothing, and the country was on the verge of panic. Where could he be hiding?

It had been an almost impossible exploit, for the father-founder of the nation, the enlightened guide and saviour of the people, the great helmsman, the president-for-life, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the beloved father of the people lived in a vast palace out of bounds to the ordinary citizen. In any case, the circular security system contrived by an Israeli professor with degrees in war science and counter-terrorism was impregnable. Five hundred yards from the palace perimeter, armed soldiers stood guard at ten-yard intervals, day and night, and this pattern was repeated at a distance of two hundred and then one hundred yards from the perimeter. The palace itself was also surrounded by a water-filled moat of immense depth swarming with African and Indian crocodiles and caymans imported from Central America which most certainly didn't feed solely on small fry, especially during the campaigns of repression that regularly fell upon the country after every genuine or mock *coup d'état*.³ Behind the moat was a ditch full of black mambas and green mambas whose powerful venom killed their victims on the spot. The perimeter wall itself – an enormous sixty-foot high structure of brick and stone as imposing as the wall of the Zimbabwe ruins – bristled with watch-towers, searchlights, nails, barbed wire and broken glass; access was by two enormous doors which also served as a drawbridge and were controlled from the inside alone. Finally the palace itself, the holy of holies, where the beloved father of the people lived: one hundred and fifty rooms in which scores of huge mirrors reflected everything and everyone, multiplying and reducing them *ad infinitum*,⁴ so that visitors always felt uneasy and oppressed, aware that their least gestures were being watched. Every movement, however small, was carried like an echo from room to room, from mirror to mirror, until it reached the ultimate mirror of all, the eye of the master himself, watching over that entire universe. No-one knew in which room the founder-president slept, not even the well-versed prostitutes he employed for several nights at a stretch for his highly sophisticated pleasures; even less likely to know were the unspoilt, happy little girls he enjoyed deflowering between the promulgation of two decrees from his palace of wonders. But, if the beloved-father-of-the-nation-the-supreme-and-enlightened-guide-the-commander-in-chief-of-the-armed-forces-and-beneficent-genius-of-mankind was invisible in the flesh to the majority of his subjects, he was, on the other hand, everywhere present: it was a statutory requirement that his portrait should hang in all homes. The news bulletins on the radio always began and ended with one of his

The man

stirring thoughts. The television news began, continued and finished in front of his picture, and the solitary local newspaper published in every issue at least four pages of letters in which citizens proclaimed their undying affection. Everywhere present but inaccessible. That was why the exploit was impossible.

And yet he had carried it off: he had succeeded in getting into the palace, bypassing the crocodiles, the mambas and the *Praetorian*⁵ guards; he had succeeded in outwitting the trap of the mirrors and had executed the father of the nation as one kills a common agitator and fomentor of coups. And then he had made the return journey, avoiding the watch-towers, the drawbridge, the green mambas, the black mambas, the crocodiles, and the *Praetorian* guards. And escaped! Forty-eight hours later he was still free!

... And then came the rumour, no-one knew where from: he had been tracked down, his itinerary was known, and the village where he was hiding had been identified; he was surrounded. This time he wouldn't get away!

Armoured cars, jeeps, and lorries full of soldiers set off at three in the morning. The tanks didn't trouble to go round the houses in the villages through which they passed, a straight line being the shortest distance between two points: villages were left burning behind them, crops were laid waste, corpses piled up in the furrows made by their caterpillar tracks. Conquerors indeed in a defeated country, they soon reached their destination. They woke up the villagers with their rifle butts. They searched everywhere, emptied the granaries, looked in the trees and inside lofts. They didn't find the man they were looking for. The officer in command of the soldiers was furious, and his neck seemed to explode under his chinstrap:

'I know he's here, the bastard who dared to murder our dear beloved founder-president who will live for ever in the *pantheon*⁶ of our immortal heroes. I know the miserable wretch has a beard and is blind in one eye. If you don't tell me within ten minutes where he's hiding, I'll burn all your houses, I'll take one of you at random and have him tortured and shot!'

The ten minutes passed amid a frightened silence as deep as the silence ^{smile} that preceded the creation of the world. Then the officer in command of the soldiers ordered the reprisals to begin. They manhandled the villagers: some were strung up by their feet and beaten; others had red pimento rubbed into their open wounds; yet others were forced to eat fresh cow dung... The villagers didn't denounce the hunted man. So they burned all the houses in the village, and the harvest as well, the fruits of a year's labour in a country where people rarely have enough to eat. The villagers still didn't give them the information they were seeking. In fact, the reason for their silence was quite simple: they genuinely did not know who had carried out the deed.

The man had acted alone. He had spent months making his preparations, reading, studying, planning; then he had put on a false beard and

covered his left eye with a black band, like a pirate. He had found how to penetrate the impregnable palace and kill the great dictator; the way he had done it was so simple he had sworn to himself that he would never reveal it, even under torture, for it could be used again. He was nevertheless surprised to see the soldiers in his village. But had they really discovered his identity or were they just bluffing? Clearly, they didn't know who he was, standing there in front of them, among his fellow villagers who were themselves in total ignorance of what he had done. There he stood, clean-shaven and with both his eyes, waiting to see what would happen next.

The officer in charge of the soldiers, a commandant, got angrier still, confronted by his victims' silence:

'I repeat for the last time! If you do not tell me where he is hiding, this bastard one-eyed son-of-a-whore without balls who has murdered our beloved president-for-life, founder of our party and leader of the nation, I'll take one of you at random and shoot him! I'll give you five minutes!'

He looked feverishly at his quartz watch. Two minutes. One minute. Thirty seconds.

'I assure you, commandant,' the village chief pleaded, 'we don't know him and we assure you he isn't in our village.'

'Too bad for you. I'm going to take a man at random and shoot him in front of you all. That will perhaps help you to understand. You, there!'

The commandant was pointing at him. He wasn't even surprised, as if he had always expected it. Deep down, it was what he wanted, for he doubted that he would be able to go through the rest of his life with an easy conscience if he allowed someone else to die in his place. He was pleased, for he would have the satisfaction of dying with his secret.

'You will be the innocent hostage who has to be sacrificed because of the obstinacy of your chief and your fellow villagers. Tie him to a tree and shoot him!'

They kicked him and beat him with rifle butts, they slashed him with bayonets. He was dragged along the ground and tied to a mango tree. His wife flung herself on him, to be brutally pulled away. Four soldiers took aim.

'One last time, tell us where the murderer is hiding.'

'I don't know, commandant!' pleaded the chief.

'Fire!'

His chest jerked forward slightly, then he collapsed without a sound. They would never find him now!

The smoke cleared. The villagers remained plunged in a deep, stunned silence, looking at the body slumped in the coarse liana ropes. The commandant, having carried out his threat, stood before them. He hesitated, not quite sure what to threaten them with now. Overcome by an inner panic, he struggled, at least to preserve the honour of his stripes.

'Well?' he asked.

At last the villagers became aware of him again.

'Well what!' roared the chief angrily. 'I told you we didn't know the man you're looking for. You didn't believe us and now you have killed one of us. What more can I say!'

The commandant could find nothing by way of reply. He rocked on his feet, uncertain what to do next, and at last called out an order to his men:

'Attention! Form up! The hunt goes on. The bastard may be hiding in the next village. There's no time to waste. Forward march!'

Then, turning to the villagers, he screamed: 'We'll find him, the son of a bastard, we'll flush him out wherever he's hiding, we'll pull off his balls and his ears, we'll pull out his nails and his eyes, we'll hang him naked in public in front of his wife, his mother and his children, and then we'll feed him to the dogs. You have my word on that.'

The jeeps and the tanks moved off and went elsewhere in search of 'the man'.

They are still looking for him. They sense his presence; somewhere he is hiding, but where? Crushed by dictatorship, the people feel their hearts beat faster when there is talk of 'the man'. Although the country is more police-ridden than ever, although it is crawling with spies, informers and hired killers, and although he has appointed as heads of security men from his own tribe entirely loyal to his cause, the new president, the second beloved father of the nation, entrusted with the task of continuing the sacred work of the father-founder, no longer dares go out. In order to frustrate the spell, he has issued a decree proclaiming himself unkillable and immortal, but still he hides away in the depths of his palace, with its labyrinth of passages and corridors, mirrors and reflections, walled up because he doesn't know when 'the man' will suddenly appear to strike him down in his turn, so that freedom, too long suppressed, may at last burst forth.

'The man', the hope of a nation and a people that says NO, and watches...

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

♦ Revision questions

- 1 What is the cause of the frantic search?
- 2 What measures had been taken to ensure that the head of state's palace was impossible to get into?
- 3 'Everywhere present but inaccessible'. Who is being referred to here? What does the statement mean?
- 4 a) Why is it unbelievable that one could get to the palace?
b) Why does 48 hours sound a very long time for the soldiers not to have caught 'the man'?
- 5 Explain why the soldiers are described as 'conquerors in a defeated nation'.

Ezekiel Mphahlele

Man must live

EZEKIEL (ESKIA) MPHAHLELE was born in 1919 in Pretoria, South Africa and grew up in a ghetto. He was the first African to graduate from UNISA (the University of South Africa) with an MA in English. He challenged the literary world with this thesis 'The African Image' which analyses the way Africans are seen by Europeans in literature. Arguing for an African perspective, Mphahlele proceeded to write for *Drum*, the popular black South African journal in the 1950s, where he headed the famous school of journalists and writers emerging from Sophiatown. (This was a tiny multicultural suburb in the heart of white Johannesburg, which nourished many African artistic talents – jazz, poetry, writing, theatre.) It was here that Mphahlele and others developed and popularised the style of the South African short story.

Mphahlele went into exile in 1957, teaching for a time in Nigeria at the University of Ibadan, then travelled to the United States to complete his doctorate in English and take up several teaching posts there. His popular autobiography published in 1959, *Down Second Avenue*, told the world about growing up under apartheid, and was banned in South Africa by the white government at that time. He later returned to South Africa to start a new African Literature Department at the University of the Witwatersrand, as well as a cultural centre in Soweto. He continues to live and write in South Africa.

'*Man must live*' is taken from an early collection of Mphahlele's stories, *In Corner B*, and tells the tragi-comic life of Khalima Zungu, an ordinary man who struggles to survive as best he can. He tries to make the most of life's opportunities but finally becomes a victim of what he calls 'Time's ironic twists'.

First stop Mayfair, Langlaagte, Ikona Westbury, New Clare, Randfontein train! Randfontein train: *i-kona*¹ Westbury, New Clare, first stop Mayfair, Langlaagte, Maraisburg, Roodepoort; all stations Randfontein! *U ya pi? Nkosi yam?* (where are you going to – My Lord!)

Khalima Zungu's voice echoed through the station platform and in the subways. Masses of people rushed into the train. Khalima Zungu was a railway policeman. He was proud of it too. So he enjoyed reciting the names of stations and sidings off pat without giving them much thought.

He had a good thundering voice too, and was pleased it was of great use here. In fact, many people said he could make an outstandingly good baritone singer. Now this did not impress him much; he did not know much about singers and singing anyhow. But what did impress him was that it was also from *women*, this remark, and if *women* said it, it must be a compliment! Not that he was so conceited, but Zungu clearly had a wholesome respect for anything that a woman said. Sometimes, of course, he had to admit, more than he liked to, that it was a weakness rather than a virtue.

Khalima Zungu also overheard such remarks as: 'Isn't he fine in that uniform; look at his broad shoulders and his big strong hands!' 'God does give some people good, big and tall bodies!' Zungu did not understand where God came in, but women had said them; so why wonder? He had good reason to be proud of himself and his work.

He could control masses of people, such as this. He paced up and down along the train to see his charges into the train. Now he had to say a harsh word or two, shout at another at the other end, then he had to drag a small boy out of the crowd to save him from harm.

They were so much like cattle, some of them, he thought; not unlike those cattle he looked after when a boy in Zululand, where he had once saved a girl who was overtaken by the stampeding herd. Most of them, he admitted, were simply anxious to get home after a day's hard work to enjoy the luxury of homely relaxation.

But why, even this argument held good, should a man sometimes go into a wrong train and then ask from inside if the train was going to Orlando or Pimville or some other place? Many of this species, he reflected, were often carried away by wrong trains, or the trains carried wrong passengers, whichever way you liked to put it.

Zungu also knew that he had to put up with people who left the right train and followed another crowd dashing to a train at the opposite platform, and perhaps fell back with them like waves beating blindly against a rocky shore and splashing back. So much like sheep, some of them were, My Lord!

But he could not help feeling he was equal to the situations, although the more he thought of them the more contemptuous he felt for these two-legged sheep. Sometimes Zungu felt sympathetic towards them for their ignorance, but when people behaved like this when the Railway Administration had Khalima Zungu to assist them (which he tried to do)

then surely, he thought, he was entitled to despise their lack of intelligence.

This afternoon, particularly, as he paced to and fro amidst the thick crowds of people waiting for their trains, Zungu was highly pleased with himself. He had just told a woman who had enquired from him, that the Cape Town train would leave at 10.10 in the night from platform number one. He wondered if he had put enough music in that 'ten ten' and if he had swung his left arm gracefully enough to look at his watch before supplying the valuable information. But he convinced himself he must have given them the desired touches.

The woman had thanked him with a not unpleasant voice that left a smile lingering on her mouth. My Lord – what would such people do without obliging Khalima Zungu! He decided this afternoon that he liked this work, what with all the nice remarks and how-nice-of-you smiles.

Khalima Zungu always reminded himself he had worked himself up; not without initiative too. He had run away from his little village in the heart of Zululand at the age of fifteen, where he attended a small school.

Before passing Standard VI he had openly told his guardian (he was an orphan) that he did not want to attend school any more. His reasons were that he was grown up, he could read and write, and if so much of life could be learned out of books, as his teacher had often impressed upon his mind, then practical problems of life could surely teach him a hundred times better than books.

Khalima Zungu had worked in Natal for his train fare to Johannesburg. He obtained a job as a storeman in a wholesale clothes factory, where he loaded and off-loaded bundles and bales of material as they came in and out. After five years in factory work he landed in the building trade as one of the hands in bricklaying. He remembered how he was made foreman over the non-European workers. Zungu also remembered how much he enjoyed moving from one suburb to another.

That was the way to learn about life and living. You had to know how to catch three or four bricks thrown to you at a time; you had to turn a spade dexterously this way and that in mixing cement and sand; you had to throw earth almost in a lump into a lorry with precision. When Zungu was raised to the rank of foreman, he felt, more than ever before, that he hated book-learning.

When the sixth year elapsed Zungu decided he needed a change. Soon he found himself under a road-building contractor. He knew he had to start from the beginning again, but that was as it should be. He told himself he was no novice in handling a pick or shovel. They went over miles and miles of highway, from town to city, from city to town, from town to 'dorp'.²

The eighth year found Zungu still splashing sparks out of rock with a pick, flattening out concrete and tar on roads. He still loved the sound of the pick as it went 'zip' into the earth. It seemed to give a more majestic

sound when it went in to the accompaniment of his 'jeep'. He loved the sound of the pick as it struck rock with a 'twing'.

Zungu was compact and muscular. He had stamina at which even his fellow-workers and employer marvelled. It always took a long time before he sweated and when a bead of sweat rolled down his temple, he knew his muscles were proving their worth.

At this point the primitive man in him seemed to be stirred. He cried for more outlet, and then looked the brute as he whacked the pick against hard ground and drove the shovel through earth and stones. It was no wonder that he was placed foreman in his third year on the road.

Zungu knew that most of the workers under him disliked him. They murmured complaints among themselves that he was 'driving them like oxen'. Some even went so far as to say that he was only strong in appearance but weak and cowardly within. They said he showed this in the way he cringed before his employer and the European workers to seek their favour.

'It's strange, you know,' he overheard one saying to a group of listeners during the rest hour, 'why is it that our people respect and fear the word of a white man and do not show either for their fellow-men?' 'Why should a person be one man towards his employer and be a totally different man towards those who rub shoulders with him?' another asked.

He always remembered this as the one outstanding occasion when he ever became very furious but mastered his anger. He remembered how he had sneered at them inwardly after listening. But why had he not embarrassed them by suddenly appearing on the scene and smashing the jaws of the gossipers so that they had a more important thing to complain about? He could not answer this question. Instead he had only sneered at them inwardly and told himself that he, Khalima Zungu, had helped construct highways for the comfort of mankind and would not defile his noble hands on the jaws of a couple of weak good-for-nothing boys like these. Even more important than this, he told himself, was the fact that man must live.

Yes, man must live. Zungu had nursed this philosophy of life since he left the village school in Zululand. Let men accuse, deride and ridicule you in your actions; let them complain that you don't respect or fear them; let them say you don't earn your living honestly; but they too, sooner or later, will come down to the hard, cold and indisputable fact that man must live.

That night Zungu was relaxing after the tiring heat of the rush hours in the afternoon. Even then he was not admitting that he was tired – that is, to the degree measured according to his own standard when he used to work on the road. He was only enjoying the night breeze in the quiet of the station. Zungu's thoughts were careering smoothly in his mind. He could not have been more satisfied and happier than now. He was doing well, he told himself, in the fourth year of his service under the Railway Administration. He had learned much during the past years.

Khalima Zungu had dealt with rock and sand and iron before; he had to deal with life now. If you could have a strong hold of a pick and crush stone to powder, there was no reason why you should not be able to shout at people to get into a train to Pimville instead of to Germiston if they wanted to go to Pimville.

It was even comparatively easy here, he thought; you could handle a man by the scruff of the neck and bring him down to implicit obedience, but to work at a tall building or have a pick chafe blisters out of your hand was not so easy.

He had seen people of vastly varying characteristics, many of whom had conjured up some crude impressions in his mind.

Only today, for instance, he had seen a man and a woman, evidently his wife, who was much larger than her partner. The way she talked and looked at him made Zungu guess that he was a henpeck – the kind he had sometimes seen thrown over a fence by a woman, or locked out of the house if he had failed to carry out her instructions to her satisfaction.

Then there was the man with a hump on his back. What burdens time and space sometimes picked on one to carry, just because a man did not know he *must* live! Probably, for all Zungu knew, this might just have been one of that odd and queer section of the human race that seem to have been created expressly to amuse the rest; the type that give beggars all they have and then resort to begging themselves, with only one monument of good service – a hump!

My Lord – what afflictions the White people have brought upon us! Now, how could a man in the days of our forefathers be bald-headed in the twenties or thirties if he was sound in the brain? Surely that bald-headed man he had seen was hardly out of the thirties. How on earth could he even be impudent enough to talk to him, Khalima Zungu, a member of the Railway Police Force, as though he was facing an equal? Perhaps, he remembered thinking, the man was trying to feel inwardly big to conceal the ridiculous shortness of stature and the shame of premature baldness. Such fools should be suffered to preserve one's own dignity. Anyway, he had no time for the class, to which this one apparently belonged, that reads so much, and knows so little how to live.

Many more Zungu had seen: the long-faced stringy woman who seemed to be engaged in an eternal war with herself; the little boy who scurried away under his mother's shawl at the sight of him (even children recognised his greatness!); the round fat man with folds in the nape of his neck, who threaded his way through the clustering crowds of people as if he was a toy that had been wound and set going in a beeline in spite of all in its way. Money-minded people usually walked this way, Zungu thought. Of course they wanted to live, he admitted, like him. But such people usually died in pursuit of life, long before they started to live. Or he might even have been the sort that was brought up softly and that frittered away their time in wielding rackets at balls or jerking their bodies in

funny movements in dance halls to weird noises! Just soft people who were not any the better for their knowledge of a world of things.

Yet if they must live, let them; all these particles of a world that scattered with the onset of night and would re-assemble tomorrow and tomorrow, each day forming an organised bundle of unlike disorganised parts – a world on Park Station.

Khalima Zungu gradually realised something must be found to help fulfil his purpose to live. Until now he had not thought seriously about marriage. He had once or twice fallen in love, but he was naturally girl-shy, although he respected a woman's word. So these incidents were of a passing nature. And he always excused his girl-shyness by telling himself woman was not yet necessary in his life project. He could live quite gaily without partnership with the female of the species. He did not necessarily deny the importance of the physical side of such partnership. In fact, if he must live, he thought, this could not be overlooked. And after all, he was just as much entitled to his ancestors' heritage as the next man was to his own.

But Zungu now thought and wished someone might meet him half-way, some woman he could win without having to exert so much effort to overcome his shyness. He knew he was standing very little chance of luck, but he hoped. Those women who had come into his life before did not satisfy the requirements of his standard of an ideal wife, the wife of his dreams and imagination...

It was a very cold mid-July night on which Khalima Zungu paced on Platform Number Ten. His hands were deep in his coat pockets, his ears buried under the lapels. One could hardly see his face under the peak of his cap, drawn well down. He looked up at the big railway clock, not feeling disposed to let his hand venture out in the act of taking out his watch. It was five minutes to twelve.

The last train to Randfontein must be pulling in now. Zungu was thinking it was late when he saw it sliding in effortlessly, if somewhat cautiously. There was only one person entering and two or three getting down; so the train did not stop long. It had scarcely disappeared when a lady came towards him, panting. She stopped abruptly and gave a sigh of despair when she looked at the hind part of the train disappearing.

Zungu approached the woman, feeling somewhat sympathetic. 'I hope you are not from far, because if so, you have no luck; that is the last train. No other till 3.15 in the morning.'

She heaved another sigh of despair. 'I am from Inanda, and can't go back now; no use. I'll just have to sit here until 3.15.'

'You are not allowed to sit here at this time,' Zungu said primly. He was dealing with a lady, but rules were rules.

'But I know nobody near here; where shall I go to?'

'I wish I knew; that's what I would like to ask you,' he replied not without a sarcastic tone. He looked at her appealing face, then at her whole figure with a searching hard stare in his eyes. 'Em – an expensive

mat, likely the rich type of woman who felt so independent that she could move about at this time of night... 'Em – not unattractive though...

Zungu thought for a moment of what he could do. It was not really his job, but he was human. An idea struck him. It would be outside the rules, but it could be risked.

You could always explain things if questioned afterwards. Besides, if the woman continued staring at him in this can't-you-do-something manner, there was no saying how long she might do so, and neither he nor she could afford to look at each other indefinitely in such cold weather.

He told her what he could do, and she accepted the offer. They went up the stairs to his little waiting room, where a fire was blazing happily and enticingly. She sat down with eagerness and decided that she was going to like it here, and that the little fears she had begun to have when he had suggested this scheme to her were vain.

They soon found themselves sailing on the glassy sea of easy conversation. She was a Mosotho, but could speak Zulu fluently. Khalima Zungu soon learned her name – Mrs Sophia Masite; that she was a widow, had two sons and a daughter; that they all lived with her in Randfontein. They talked about many other things.

Ten minutes past three found the two walking down the steps to the train. After the train had left Zungu went back to his fire. The crackling sound of the fire, the sound of the flames dancing happily and greedily licking the roof of the grate, the radiating gentle warmth, all these, were in tune with his inner emotions. They told him life was like the magic carpet he had read of in school. It carried you over mountain peaks, over green valleys and beautiful streams; through fearfully dark gorges and over rugged ugly boulders; over sharp unfriendly briars, through jungles and dark mysterious kingdoms, where you felt you were being swallowed up into the pit of death; and again you could emerge into the smiling world, swim in the fragrant smell of flowers, taste of the sweet, the bitter and the bitter-sweet fruit; always and forever borne by the magic carpet – whither no-one knew. Yet, whatever the end, man must live.

Zungu also felt that the hollowness, emptiness and the vague sense of defeatism that sometimes overwhelmed him were not there. The smiling face of that woman, all genuine thankfulness and obvious admiration written on it, and her gentle and communicative voice filled him with the sense of the beauty of life. And he knew the magic carpet had brought him to this stage.

A week later Zungu received a card from Mrs Masite, inviting him to a party on the occasion of her daughter's twentieth birthday. He was clearly excited and determined not to miss it.

That party was the turning point of Khalima Zungu's life, now forty years of age. It was during the party that Zungu decided to master his shyness. It was a very easy task, when he came to think of it afterwards – this business of winning women.

Zungu and Mrs Masite were married three weeks later. She was a rich woman, as Zungu had judged on the night when she was a damsel in distress. They soon decided that he should not work any more. Even if he exhausted his savings, she told him, it was no matter; he could draw on hers, which made his look like the contents of a child's money box.

It did not take long before he started to draw on his wife's money. Things went on smoothly at first between him and his wife and step-children. Zungu had no cause for discontent. It was a world of plenty and man must live, live abundantly.

But as time wore on and he was taking life for granted, the children began to show him that he, being no more than a step-father, was not entitled to their respect. Zungu tried to keep his feelings to himself. The climax came when one night his step-daughter told him unreservedly in the presence of her mother that he was 'backward', 'uncivilised', and 'conceited', and that, if he wanted to know the truth, her mother had married him out of pity because he had nothing to speak for him in trying to earn his living. So he must behave himself.

Zungu knew he had developed the habit of drinking excessively. He knew his nerves were giving way; and easy life had begun to dull his wits. But he could not take it. Such insults as his daughter had hurled at him must not be allowed to go on. In fact, they showed ill-breeding.

He looked knives at his step-daughter, then at her mother. She was unmoved. Was she sitting there indifferently and passively without a word of reproach to her daughter? There was an expression of contempt and derision on that face of hers. Her eyes dared him to talk. Zungu was about to say something after working up his fury to a high pitch, but to his disappointment he found he had nothing to say. Suddenly a sense of defeat and hollowness came upon him. He was tired. His brain was stagnant, his muscles limp, his spirit flat.

Of course, he, Khalima Zungu, formerly of the Railway Police Force, should have seen the motive behind this woman's subtle intrigues in dragging him into marriage. He now saw it as clearly as crystal that she had married him as a convenience. She had always remained in the background when her children insulted him. Most probably she was pulling the wire and conducting this machinery. He had been to her a humble, harmless and ideal companion. She now realised his value had ended where his drinking habit began. Zungu had genuine love for his wife; of this he was sure.

In his magical world of riches and splendour Zungu had been used as a tool of vengeance by his wife. Much against his will, however much contempt he had for the so-called intelligentsia class, he had received them into the house and behaved as a gentleman would – as far as little knowledge gave him scope. Then there were the ordinary class, to which Zungu belonged. He had to refuse them admission because his wife said they had 'tried to stand in her way when she aspired for wealth and learning out of sheer jealousy'.

On a warm breezy night Khalima Zungu walked from the beer hall, drunk as a fiddler. He could barely support himself on his legs, but he managed to struggle up to the door of his house. He knocked, but nobody answered. Again he knocked, and again, but the door was not opened. He then tried the knob. It was locked. Zungu kicked and heaved his shoulders against the door until sweat ran down his face. Then he remembered he had a duplicate key which the locksmith had made for him to use on such nights as this when he was locked out.

He entered and called roaringly, but the house was empty. Even in his state of mind Zungu could not but notice a difference. His mind struggled to diagnose the situation. Then he decided that there was no furniture, no picture; in fact, nothing but the bare skeleton of the house. He went to the bedroom. Here he found only his case of clothes on the floor. Besides this sad tale the house could tell no more. Zungu fell on the floor and remained there, a hopeless heap.

At about midnight he woke up. He wondered where he was and why he was there and not on his bed. The light was still on. Then he remembered that the scenery was not new to him. As quickly as lightning Zungu sprang to his feet. He rushed out in a speed not unlike that of a scalded cat to the outside storehouse. There was a drum of petrol, left as he thought, because it was of no use to that pack of foxes.

My Lord – he, Khalima Zungu, formerly of the Railway Police Force, would teach them a lesson. Take out all the yolk and white of an egg and mock him with the empty shell! He would reduce this shell to cinders if it meant cremating himself alive in it.

Zungu carried the drum into the house and poured the contents over the floor and splashed some over the walls. He set the house on fire. He stood quite still as the flames reached out for one another madly and hungrily. Then he remembered, strangely enough, what he had been told at school about hell. It must be like this in hell. The spectacle itself was hell incarnated, and here he was, fitting well into it as though he was the only evil doer (if he was) worth burning in hell. But my Lord – he must live!

With this thought he dashed to where he thought the door must be, but hit against a naked wall. He turned this way and that, choking with fumes and burning. Presently he found an exit and staggered on to the verandah. Zungu felt nauseated and saw himself falling into someone's arms...

When Zungu came to he found himself in hospital. His mind was still hazy and misty. There were some people around his bed, whom he recognised as neighbours. One told him how he had found him, wrapped him up in some sacking and rolled him over the ground. He had known that if anybody was in that house it would most likely be Zungu himself today, because he had seen his wife and children packing away early in the day.

He was not seriously burnt, but the shock had been severe. Zungu recovered. When he left the hospital, the problem of where to sleep con-

fronted him. The man who had saved him offered him temporary food and a sleeping place because he had a large family. Soon he realised he would have to be a nomad, a tramp, sleeping where he could, eating what he could get.

At the foot of a hill stands a corrugated iron *shanty*.³ Zungu put it up for himself. His experience in building stood him in good stead, although he admitted, not without a pang of the sense of Time's ironic twists, this experience was not accounting for itself at the right moment.

He can be seen going to and fro with a load on his back, staggering on in a stooping gait. That upright muscular stature has weathered in the test of time; that confident light stride has slowed down to heavy, uncertain and clumsy movement, giving him the appearance of a dog wounded after a hunt. Yet he is only in the forties.

That world of love and plenty was a dream world, when he thinks of it, whose glories have vanished with the dawn of reality. Today Zungu feels as if Time takes a slow pace purposely to lengthen his life, of which now remain a few rags, too worn out to be patched. He still drinks and murmurs to himself.

Zungu's eyes are expressionless, whether he be happy or not. That twinkle is gone. But there is something in that stolid blankness in those eyes; something of stubbornness. When he looks at you, you cannot help but read the stubborn words: What do you expect me to be – a magician or a superman, or a soft learned genteel animal? My Lord – I *must* live, man!

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

♦ Revision questions

- 1 What do you learn of Khalima Zungu's character? How is he the cause of the problems that befall him?
- 2 How does Khalima Zungu view education? Do you agree with him? Why?
- 3 Mention the different jobs that Khalima Zungu does. Why does he change jobs so often? Is he a committed worker? Why?
- 4 What evidence is there that there is racial discrimination in Khalima Zungu's society?
- 5 Identify three incidents of humour in the story. What do you find really funny in each incident?
- 6 How does Khalima Zungu regard the less fortunate people in society? Would you regard the less fortunate in the same way?
- 7 Describe how the love affair between Khalima Zungu and Mrs Masite started, developed, and ended.

Chinua Achebe

The voter

CHINUA ACHEBE is the most popular of all African writers, and is largely responsible for introducing African literature to the rest of the world. His first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), was an instant best seller, selling more than eight million copies worldwide. It charts the destruction of the traditional Ibo society by the invasion of the British missionaries and colonialists. He wrote three sequels: *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God* and *A Man of the People*. He has also published poetry, short stories, political commentary, and literary criticism, and recently, another novel about contemporary Nigeria, *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Achebe's ideas have shaken the literary world, particularly in the West, where he launched his career by writing an article in which he accused the great English writer Joseph Conrad of being a racist. In his writings, he seeks to correct the distorted view of Africa held by Westerners and argues that the novelist is a teacher who needs to re-educate people. But in so doing, Achebe is no propagandist. His writing is humorous and even self-critical.

Chinua Achebe was born in 1930 in Ogidi (Eastern Nigeria). He attended the University of Obadan and, since the publication of his novels, has been sought after by many universities worldwide. He now lectures in the USA.

'*The voter*' is a typical Achebe story – a blend of satire, dark humour and skill, flavoured with Ibo proverbs. Set in the fictional Nigerian province of Umuofia, the story is a criticism of the corrupt political system in operation in his country.

Rufus Okeke – Roof, for short – was a very popular man in his village. Although the villagers did not explain it in so many words Roof's popularity was a measure of their gratitude to an energetic young man who, unlike most of his fellows nowadays, had not abandoned the village in

order to seek work – any work – in the towns. And Roof was not a village tout either. Everyone knew how he had spent two years as a bicycle repairer's apprentice in Port Harcourt and had given up of his own free will a bright future to return to his people and guide them in these political times. Not that Umuofia needed a lot of guidance. The village already belonged *en masse*¹ to the People's Alliance Party (PAP), and its most illustrious son – Chief the Honourable Marcus Ibe – was Minister of Culture in the out-going government (which was certain to be the in-coming one as well). Nobody doubted that the Honourable Minister would be re-elected in his constituency. Opposition to him was like the proverbial fly trying to move a dunghill. It would have been ridiculous enough without coming, as it did now, from a complete nonentity. SMILE

As was to be expected, Roof was in the service of Honourable Minister for the coming elections. He had become a real expert in election campaigning at all levels – village, local government or national. He could tell the mood and temper of the electorate at any given time. For instance he had warned the Minister months ago about the radical change that had come into the thinking of Umuofia since the last national election.

The villagers had had five years in which to see how quickly and plentifully politics brought wealth, chieftaincy titles, doctorate degrees and other honours some of which, like the last, had still to be explained satisfactorily to them; for they still expected a doctor to heal the sick. Anyhow, these honours had come so readily to the man they had given their votes to free of charge five years ago that they were now ready to think again.

Their point was that only the other day Marcus Ibe was a not too successful Mission-school teacher. Then politics had come to their village and he had wisely joined up, some say just in time to avoid imminent dismissal arising from a female teacher's pregnancy. Today he was Chief the Honourable; he had two long cars and had just built himself the biggest house anyone had seen in those parts. But let it be said that none of these successes had gone to Marcus's head – as they well might. He remained a man of the people. Whenever he could he left the good things of the capital and returned to his village which had neither running water nor electricity. He knew the source of his good fortune, unlike the little bird who ate and drank and went out to challenge his personal spirit. Marcus had christened his new house 'Umuofia Mansions' in honour of his village and slaughtered five bulls and countless goats to entertain the people on the day it was opened by the Archbishop.

Everyone was full of praise for him. One old man said: 'Our son is a good man; he is not like the mortar which as soon as food comes its way turns its back on the ground.' But when the feasting was over the villagers told themselves that they had under-rated the power of the ballot-paper before and should not do so again. Chief the Honourable Marcus Ibe was not unprepared. He had drawn five months' salary in advance, changed a few hundred pounds into shining shillings and armed his

campaign boys with eloquent little jute bags. In the day he made his speeches; at night his stalwarts conducted their whispering campaign. Roof was the most trusted of these campaigners.

'We have a Minister from our village, one of our own sons,' he said to a group of elders in the house of Ogbuefi Ezenwa, a man of high traditional title. 'What greater honour can a village have? Do you ever stop to ask yourselves why we should be singled out for this honour? I will tell you: it is because we are favoured by the leaders of PAP. Whether we cast our paper for Marcus or not PAP will continue to rule. Think of the pipe-borne water they have promised us...'

Besides Roof and his assistant there were five elders in the room. An old hurricane lamp with a cracked, sooty, glass chimney gave out yellowish light in their midst. The elders sat on very low stools. On the floor, directly in front of each of them, lay two shilling pieces. Outside the moon kept a straight face.

'We believe every word you say to be true,' said Ezenwa. 'We shall every one of us drop his paper for Marcus. Who would leave an *ozo*² feast and go to a poor ritual meal? Tell Marcus he has our papers, and our wives' papers too. But what we do say is that two shillings is shameful.' He brought the lamp close and tilted it at the money before him as if to make sure he had not mistaken its value. 'Yes, two shillings; it is too shameful. If Marcus were a poor man - which our ancestors forbid - I should be the first to give him my paper free, as I did before. But today Marcus is a great man and does his things like a great man. We did not ask him for money yesterday; we shall not ask him tomorrow. But today is our day; we have climbed the *iroko*³ tree today and would be foolish not to take down all the firewood we need.'

Roof had to agree. He had lately been taking down a lot of firewood himself. Only yesterday he had asked Marcus for one of his many rich robes - and had got it. Last Sunday Marcus's wife (the teacher that nearly got him in trouble) had objected (like the woman she was) when Roof pulled out his fifth bottle of beer from the kerosene refrigerator, and was roundly and publicly rebuked by her husband. To cap it all Roof had won a land case recently because, among other things, he had been chauffeur-driven to the disputed site. So he understood the elders about the firewood.

'Alright,' he said in English and then reverted to Ibo. 'Let us not quarrel about small things.' He stood up and adjusted his robes. Then he bent down like a priest distributing the host and gave one shilling more to every man: only he did not put it into their palms but on the floor in front of them. The men, who had so far not deigned to touch the things, looked at the floor and shook their heads. Roof got up again and gave each man another shilling.

'I am through,' he said with a defiance that was no less effective for being transparently faked. The elders too knew how far to go without losing decorum. So when Roof added: 'Go cast your paper for the enemy if you like!' they quickly calmed him down with a suitable speech from

each of them. By the time the last man had spoken it was possible – without great loss of dignity – to pick up the things from the floor.

The enemy Roof had referred to was the Progressive Organisation Party (POP) which had been formed by the tribes down the coast to save themselves – as the founders of the party proclaimed – from ‘total political, cultural, social and religious annihilation’. Although it was clear the party had no chance here it had plunged – with typical foolishness – into a straight fight with PAP, providing cars and loudspeakers to a few local rascals and thugs to go around and make a lot of noise. No-one knew for certain how much money POP had let loose in Umuofia but it was said to be very considerable. Their local campaigners would end up very rich, no doubt.

Up to last night everything had been ‘moving according to plan’ – as Roof would have put it. Then he had received a strange visit from the leader of the POP campaign team. Although he and Roof were well known to each other and might even be called friends his visit was cold and business-like. No words were wasted. He placed five pounds on the floor before Roof and said, ‘We want your vote.’ Roof got up from his chair, went to the outside door, closed it carefully and returned to his chair. The brief exercise gave him enough time to weigh the proposition. As he spoke his eyes never left the red notes on the floor.

‘You know I work for Marcus,’ he said feebly. ‘It will be very bad...’

‘Marcus will not be there when you put in your paper. We have plenty of work to do tonight; are you taking this or not?’

‘It will not be heard outside this room?’ asked Roof.

‘We are after votes not gossip.’

‘Alright,’ said Roof in English.

The man nudged his companion and he brought forward an object covered with red cloth and proceeded to remove the cover. It was a fearsome little affair contained in a clay pot with feathers stuck into it.

‘This *iyi*⁴ comes from Mbanta. You know what that means. Swear that you will vote for Maduka. If you fail to do so, this *iyi* to note.’

Roof’s heart had nearly flown out of his mouth when he saw the *iyi*; and indeed he knew the fame of Mbanta in these things. But he was a man of quick decision. What could a single vote cast in secret for Maduka take away from Marcus’s certain victory? Nothing.

‘I will cast my paper for Maduka; if not, this *iyi* take note.’

‘Das all,’ said the man as he rose with his companion, who had covered up the object again and was taking it back to their car.

‘You know he has no chance against Marcus,’ said Roof at the door.

‘It is enough that he gets a few votes now; next time he will get more. People will hear that he gives out pounds, not shillings and they will listen.’

Election morning. The great day every five years when the people exercised power – or thought they did. Weather-beaten posters on walls of houses, tree trunks and telegraph poles. The few that were still whole called out their message to those who could read. Vote for the People's Alliance Party! Vote for the Progressive Organisation Party! Vote for PAP! Vote for POP! The posters that were torn called out as much of the message as they could.

As usual Chief the Honourable Marcus Ibe was doing things in grand style. He had hired a highlife band from Umuru and stationed it at such a distance from the voting booths as just managed to be lawful. Many villagers danced to the music, their ballot papers held aloft, before proceeding to the booths. Chief the Honourable Marcus Ibe sat in the 'owner's corner' of his enormous green car and smiled and nodded. One enlightened villager came up to the car, shook hands with the great man and said in advance: 'Congrats!' This immediately set the pattern. Hundreds of admirers shook Marcus's hand and said 'Corngrass!'

Roof and the other organisers were prancing up and down, giving last minute advice to the voters and pouring with sweat.

'Do not forget,' he said again to a group of illiterate women who seemed ready to burst with enthusiasm and good humour, 'our sign is the motor-car...'

'Like the one Marcus is sitting inside.'

'Thank you, mother,' said Roof. 'It is the same car. The box with the car shown on its body is the box for you. Don't look at the other with the man's head: it is for those whose heads are not correct.'

This was greeted with loud laughter. Roof cast a quick and busy-like glance towards the Minister and received a smile of appreciation.

'Vote for the car,' he shouted, all the veins in his neck standing out. 'Vote for the car and you will ride in it!'

'Or if we don't our children will,' piped the same sharp old girl.

The band struck up a new number: 'Why walk when you can ride?'

In spite of his apparent calm and confidence Chief the Honourable Marcus was a relentless stickler for detail. He knew he would win what the newspapers called 'a landslide victory' but he did not wish even so to throw away a single vote. So as soon as the first rush of voters was over he promptly asked his campaign boys to go one at a time and put in their ballot papers.

'Roof, you had better go first,' he said.

Roof's spirits fell: but he let no-one see it. All morning he had masked his deep worry with a surface exertion which was unusual even for him. Now he dashed off in his springy fashion towards the booths. A policeman at the entrance searched him for illegal ballot papers and passed him. Then the electoral officer explained to him about the two boxes. By this time the spring had gone clean out of his walk. He sidled in and was confronted by the car and the head. He brought out his ballot paper from his pocket and looked at it. How could he betray Marcus even in secret?

He resolved to go back to the other man and return his five pounds... FIVE POUNDS! He knew at once it was impossible. He had sworn on that *iyi*.

At this point he heard the muffled voice of the policeman asking the electoral officer what the man was doing inside. '*Abi na pickin im de born?*'⁵

Quick as lightning a thought leapt into Roof's mind. He folded the paper, tore it in two along the crease and put one half in each box. He took the precaution of putting the first half into Maduka's box and confirming the action verbally: 'I vote for Maduka.'

They marked his thumb with indelible purple ink to prevent his return, and he went out of the booth as jauntily as he had gone in.

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

♦ Revision questions

- 1 What qualities of Rufus Okeke made him popular in his village?
- 2 a) State three proverbial sayings used in the story.
b) What does each mean?
c) How is each applicable to the incident where it is used?
- 3 a) What, according to the story, do people gain by becoming politicians?
b) Would such people make responsible leaders?
- 4 In what ways was Marcus Ibe 'a man of the people'?
- 5 What was Rufus's main argument in his campaign for Marcus Ibe?
- 6 What does 'firewood' stand for?
- 7 Do you find evidence of corruption in this story? Give examples.
- 8 What is ironical about what happens between Rufus Okeke and the leader of POP?
- 9 How can you tell that many of the voters were not educated?
- 10 Discuss the characters of Rufus Okeke and Marcus Ibe.

♦ Topics for discussion

- 1 a) Have you ever been involved in campaigns for any election? What role did you play?
b) What do you think of the practice of giving people money or using any other influence to make them vote for others?
- 2 Why did the POP campaign leader visit Rufus Okeke?
- 3 The politicians in this story are more interested in benefiting materially rather than in providing good leadership. Do you agree?
- 4 What would you have done if you found yourself in the same situation as Rufus Okeke?

Bessie Head

The prisoner who wore glasses

BESSIE HEAD (1937-86) was born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and classified as 'coloured' because of her white mother and black father. She was a skilled student, teacher and journalist, but was unhappy with her life, making a suicide attempt before she married Harold Head and fled into exile to Botswana. There she found temporary peace in the rural village of Serowe, and wrote a series of novels which placed her as one of the foremost African women writers of our time. *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973) all show great literary skill, and a powerful, unique literary style. At first critics did not understand her unusual way of writing or her subject matter, which often dealt with insanity, but now they agree on her brilliance. Her most popular and readable works are the short stories *The Collector of Treasures* (1977) and the documentary novel *Serowe: Village of the Rainwind* (1981).

Bessie Head, a victim of alcohol and mental instability, died tragically in Serowe when she was only 49 years old.

'*The prisoner who wore glasses*' is from a collection of stories published after her death, and deals with an experience in apartheid South Africa. The story goes beyond mere protest at injustice, however, and points beyond racism to the humanity in all of us, and how people will always find a way to survive and overcome oppression in one way or another.

Scarcely a breath of wind disturbed the stillness of the day and the long rows of cabbages were bright green in the sunlight. Large white clouds drifted slowly across the deep blue sky. Now and then they obscured the sun and caused a chill on the backs of the prisoners who had to work all day long in the cabbage field. This trick the clouds were playing with the

sun eventually caused one of the prisoners who wore glasses to stop work, straighten up, and peer shortsightedly at them. He was a thin little fellow with a hollowed-out chest and comic knobbly knees. He also had a lot of fanciful ideas because he smiled at the clouds.

'Perhaps they want me to send a message to the children,' he thought tenderly, noting that the clouds were drifting in the direction of his home some hundred miles away. But before he could frame the message, the warden in charge of his work detail shouted: 'Hey, what you tink you're doing, Brille?'

The prisoner swung round, blinking rapidly, yet at the same time sizing up the enemy. He was a new warden, named Jacobus Stephanus Hanneljie. His eyes were the colour of the sky but they were frightening. A simple, primitive, brutal soul gazed out of them.

The prisoner bent down quickly and a message was quietly passed down the line: 'We're in for trouble this time, comrades.'

'Why?' rippled back up the line.

'Because he's not human,' the reply rippled down and yet only the crunching of the spades as they turned over the earth disturbed the stillness.

This particular work detail was known as Span One. It was composed of ten men and they were all political prisoners. They were grouped together for convenience, as it was one of the prison regulations that no black warden should be in charge of a political prisoner lest this prisoner convert him to his views. It never seemed to occur to the authorities that this very reasoning was the strength of Span One and a clue to the strange terror they aroused in the warders. As political prisoners they were unlike the other prisoners in the sense that they felt no guilt nor were they outcasts of society. All guilty men instinctively cower which was why it was the kind of prison where men got knocked out cold with a blow at the back of the head from an iron bar. Up until the arrival of Warden Hanneljie, no warden had dared beat any member of Span One and no warden had lasted more than a week with them. The battle was entirely psychological. Span One was assertive and it was beyond the scope of white warders to handle assertive black men. Thus, Span One had got out of control. They were the best thieves and liars in the camp. They lived all day on raw cabbages. They chatted and smoked tobacco. And since they moved, thought, and acted as one, they had perfected every technique of group concealment.

Trouble began that very day between Span One and Warden Hanneljie. It was because of the shortsightedness of Brille. That was the nickname he was given in prison and is the Afrikaans word for someone who wears glasses. Brille could never judge the approach of the prison gates and on several previous occasions he had munched on cabbages and dropped them almost at the feet of the warden, and all previous warders had overlooked this. Not so Warden Hanneljie.

'Who dropped that cabbage?' he thundered.

Brille stepped out of line. 'I did,' he said meekly.

'All right,' said Hannetjie. 'The whole Span goes three meals off.'

'But I told you I did it,' Brille protested.

The blood rushed to Warder Hannetjie's face. 'Look 'ere,' he said. 'I don't take orders from a kaffir. I don't know what kind of kaffir you tink you are. Why don't you say Baas. I'm your Baas. Why don't you say Baas, hey?'

Brille blinked his eyes rapidly but by contrast his voice was strangely calm. 'I'm twenty years older than you,' he said.

It was the first thing that came to mind but the comrades seemed to think it a huge joke. A titter swept up the line. The next thing, Warder Hannetjie whipped out a *knobkerrie*¹ and gave Brille several blows about the head. What surprised his comrades was the speed with which Brille had removed his glasses or else they would have been smashed to pieces on the ground.

That evening in the cell Brille was very apologetic. 'I'm sorry, comrades,' he said. 'I've put you into a hell of a mess.'

'Never mind, brother,' they said. 'What happens to one of us happens to all.'

'I'll try to make up for it, comrades,' he said. 'I'll steal something so that you don't go hungry.'

Privately, Brille was very philosophical about his head wounds. It was the first time an act of violence had been perpetrated against him but he had long been a witness of extreme, almost unbelievable human brutality. He had twelve children and his mind travelled back that evening through the sixteen years of bedlam in which he had lived. It had all happened in a small drab little three-bedroom house in a small drab little street in the Eastern Cape and the children kept coming year after year because neither he nor Martha managed the contraceptives the right way, and a teacher's salary never allowed moving to a bigger house and he was always taking exams to improve this salary only to have it all eaten up by hungry mouths. Everything was pretty horrible, especially the way the children fought. They'd get hold of each other's heads and give them a good bashing against the wall. Martha gave up somewhere along the line, so they worked out a thing between them. The bashings, biting, and blood were to operate in full swing until he came home. He was to be the bogeyman and when it worked he never failed to have a sense of godhead at the way in which his presence could change savages into fairly reasonable human beings.

Yet somehow it was this chaos and mismanagement at the centre of his life that drove him into politics. It was really an ordered beautiful world with just a few basic slogans to learn, along with the rights of mankind. At one stage, before things became very bad, there were conferences to attend, all very far away from home.

'Let's face it,' he thought ruefully. 'I'm only learning right now what it means to be a politician. All this while I've been running away from Martha and the kids.'

And the pain in his head brought a hard lump to his throat. That was what the children did to each other daily and Martha wasn't managing and if Warder Hannetjie had not interrupted him that morning he would have sent the following message: 'Be good comrades, my children. Cooperate, then life will run smoothly.'

The next day Warder Hannetjie caught this old man with twelve children stealing grapes from the farm shed. They were an enormous quantity of grapes in a ten-gallon tin and for this misdeed the old man spent a week in the isolation cell. In fact, Span One as a whole was in constant trouble. Warder Hannetjie seemed to have eyes at the back of his head. He uncovered the trick about the cabbages, how they were split in two with the spade and immediately covered with earth and then unearthed again and eaten with split-second timing. He found out how tobacco smoke was beaten into the ground and he found out how conversations were whispered down the wind.

For about two weeks Span One lived in acute misery. The cabbages, tobacco, and conversations had been the pivot of jail life to them. Then one evening they noticed that their good old comrade who wore the glasses was looking rather pleased with himself. He pulled out a four-ounce packet of tobacco by way of explanation and the comrades fell upon it with great greed. Brille merely smiled. After all, he was the father of many children. But when the last shred had disappeared, it occurred to the comrades that they ought to be puzzled.

Someone said: 'I say, brother. We're watched like hawks these days. Where did you get the tobacco?'

'Hannetjie gave it to me,' said Brille.

There was a long silence. Into it dropped a quiet bombshell. 'I saw Hannetjie in the shed today' – and the failing eyesight blinked rapidly. 'I caught him in the act of stealing five bags of fertiliser and he bribed me to keep my mouth shut.'

There was another long silence.

think about
doing 'Prison is an evil life,' Brille continued, apparently discussing some irrelevant matter. 'It makes a man contemplate all kinds of evil deeds.'

He held out his hand and closed it. 'You know, comrades,' he said. 'I've got Hannetjie. I'll betray him tomorrow.'

Everyone began talking at once.

'Forget it, brother. You'll get shot.'

Brille laughed.

'I won't,' he said. 'That is what I mean about evil. I am a father of children and I saw today that Hannetjie is just a child and stupidly truthful. I'm going to punish him severely because we need a good warder.'

The following day, with Brille as witness, Hannetjie confessed to the theft of the fertiliser and was fined a large sum of money. From then on, Span One did very much as they pleased while Warder Hannetjie

stood by and said nothing. But it was Brille who carried this to extremes.

One day, at the close of work Warder Hannetjie said: 'Brille, pick up my jacket and carry it back to the camp.'

'But nothing in the regulations says I'm your servant, Hannetjie,' Brille replied coolly.

'I've told you not to call me Hannetjie. You must say, Baas,' but Warden Hannetjie's voice lacked conviction.

In turn, Brille squinted up at him. 'I'll tell you something about this Baas business, Hannetjie,' he said. 'One of these days we are going to run the country. You are going to clean my car. Now, I have a fifteen-year-old son and I'd die of shame if you had to tell him that I ever called you Baas.'

Warder Hannetjie went red in the face and picked up his coat.

On another occasion Brille was seen to be walking about the prison yard openly smoking tobacco. On being taken before the prison commander, he claimed to have received the tobacco from Warder Hannetjie. All throughout the tirade from his chief, Warder Hannetjie failed to defend himself, but his nerve broke completely.

He called Brille to one side. 'Brille,' he said. 'This thing between you and me must end. You may not know it but I have a wife and children and you're driving me to suicide.'

'Why, don't you like your own medicine, Hannetjie?' Brille asked quietly.

'I can give you anything you want,' Warder Hannetjie said in desperation.

'It's not only me but the whole of Span One,' said Brille cunningly. 'The whole of Span One wants something from you.'

Warder Hannetjie brightened with relief. 'I tink I can manage if it's tobacco you want,' he said.

Brille looked at him, for the first time struck with pity and guilt. He wondered if he had carried the whole business too far. The man was really a child.

'It's not tobacco we want, but you,' he said. 'We want you on our side. We want a good warder because without a good warder we won't be able to manage the long stretch ahead.'

Warder Hannetjie interpreted this request in his own fashion and his interpretation of what was good and human often left the prisoners of Span One speechless with surprise. He had a way of slipping off his revolver and picking up a spade and digging alongside Span One. He had a way of producing unheard-of luxuries like boiled eggs from his farm nearby and things like cigarettes, and Span One responded nobly and got the reputation of being the best work detail in the camp. And it wasn't only take from their side. They were awfully good at stealing certain commodities like fertiliser which were needed on the farm of Warder Hannetjie.

Tijan Sallah

Innocent terror

TIJAN M. SALLAH holds a Ph.D. in economics, works for the World Bank in Washington DC, USA, and writes richly evocative poetry and fiction. Born in The Gambia in 1958, Dr Sallah became interested in African literature at a young age, yet only began writing later in life. His first collection of fiction, *When Africa was a Young Woman*, was published in 1980, and his poetry collection, *Before the New Earth*, was published in 1988. He has since written and edited several other collections of fiction and poetry, and is working on a biography of Chinua Achebe.

'*Innocent terror*' is a story of present day life in The Gambia: immigrants bring skills, culture and energy, but they can also bring terror and death. This story documents how Lebanese immigrants have not integrated with the local population but instead have formed a new elite. Sallah skilfully relates this tragic tale of injustice using puns and a lively wit borrowed from his Wolof language and culture.

It was one of those incidents that we saw in Cowboys-and-Indians movies. Or frontiersmen of the wild American West. But it happened in our territory. It was unfortunate. Even sad. But it was one of those terrible events that arrest the long festival of innocence. Yeats would have understood it, for he wrote about it in his poetry. Out of it, a terrible beauty. A terrible beauty is born. And the ceremony of innocence is drowned.

He pulled the trigger on a cook and the rest was cold-blooded history. And it was an innocent cook. He pulled the trigger to retrieve a primitive thirst. The thirst for hunting which the city could not avail him. He had decided that in the absence of four-legged creatures, a two-legged one would suffice as game. The act, of course, was tainted with supercilious innocence. He did not load the gun. He just did the trigger-pulling. But could he be excused for pointing the mouth of even an empty gun at a cook? The reality was that the killing of the cook was monstrous. It

happened in open daylight. As the fidgety finches sang in the mangoes. As the customers crowded the counter of his father's store.

His father was notoriously rich. And gold afforded the son the luxury of killing. Perhaps killing for the hell of it. Gold, that yellowish necessary devil. And how it can make inadequates into gods. Gold, King Midas died from it. Solomon did not plead for it; wise Solomon, he chose the path of sagacity. Gold, that god that can lure away reason and bribe emotions onto the path of tantrums. Gold, especially effortless gold, the genie that can elevate amateur hunters onto the stage of life so that they can treat bloody life as a pantomime. O gold, madness in the lunch basket, the sexy maiden under the periwinkle sky, beautiful in expanding the range of options but gaudy for circling the rich with myopia. And how they may not see beyond their noses, and how they may eat in the restaurant of human anguish and, at nightfall, count their coins with wine and Bach, cheering with senseless delight.

The air smelled of blood, the corpse lying in a corner of the kitchen. Flies partook of their share in the primal visit, feasting and exploring the dripping saliva from the corner of the mouth, leaping on the contours of the resigned face. Sometimes they would leap onto the kitchen table, then bounce back on the face, or just glide around the upper air of the body as if targeting some favoured spot. The young man gazed at the corpse and mourned in his heart. He felt bereft. A bereavement mixing self-pity with remorse. He pondered about his family's reactions and the potential repercussions.

Two days after the incident, the newspapers ran front-page articles about it. Titles flamboyantly captured the tragedy with blinking flames. The popular *Outlook* ran a front-page feature titled 'Kololian Cook Terrorized by Lebanese Youth'. People who saw the title initially thought that Middle Eastern terrorism had found fresh ground, and so the title triggered immediate and enormous interest. One street commentator, a university graduate, upon seeing the feature's title hastily ran his mouth the way a child babbles verbal diarrhoea. 'These Arabs and Israelis,' he asserted, 'they have ruined their countries with violence. And now they export their anguish... They visit the morning of our land with their terror.' A passing bank officer shrugged his head and shoulders in disapproval of the statement. But all over, the talk of the town was the dead cook and the untutored youth.

The death of a cook became one of those events that muster everyone's curiosity. If it was the shooting of a public figure, nobody would have cared. That was something to be expected. But a cook. A simple and humble cook. Unfeigning and innocent. How could ignorance have led to such cruel sport? A plain cook so draped with sweet everydayness that everyone would have wanted to pick these qualities and swallow. *Chei!*¹ How could such innocent terror have evaded the responsibilities of a mutually human-regarding society?

A few days later, the Head of State had come over the National Radio and expressed his grief. Small indeed was beautiful. And everybody knew that. For where in the world would the Head of State express his sorrow publicly over the shooting of a cook? All over the world, children have died of napalm. Sometimes even from the napalm of starvation. But who gives a damn? All over, priests have been shot, their efforts frustrated and their convictions nullified. Innocent women and children kidnapped, terrorised and thrown into the careless trash bins of the streets. So why would a Head of State express his grief over the shooting of a cook in a world accustomed to treachery, murder, and blood? *Che!* Only in Kololi could that happen.

The Tamedou family had mourned for days. For them, the Head of State's gesture was at best one of public relations. Beyond that, it was empty. The Head of State was on the side of the merchants and therefore of the Lebanese. He had manured the ground for their success and given them the lantern light for their abuse of every norm of acceptable behaviour. The catalogue of Lebanese misbehaviour was lengthy – from receiving most favoured treatment from the banks and from all respectable government institutions to the rude flouting of local customs, to sometimes engaging in incest and drugs. They picked the leanest meat from the markets and arrogantly displayed their wealth with unrefined alacrity. And as in Kololi, was it all over the region.

'These Lebanese,' remarked Badou, the younger Tamedou, 'they think they own Africa. I heard that in Sierra Leone they run the state.'

'I am not surprised,' commented a friend.

'I even heard of one of them... a powerful one... in Sierra Leone, who had his private plane, private airport, and private bank.'

'And I'm sure private army!'

They chuckled in a cynical laughter. Their faces locked in silent agreement.

'They run states within our states,' continued the younger Tamedou. 'In Sierra Leone, that rich Lebanese is so powerful that he tells the Head of State what to do. And so when the Lebanese speaks, everyone, including the boss of the government, listens.'

'But how can our countries function like that?'

'You tell me, I swear to God.'

A silent pause. A moment of meditative thought-gathering. A strange glow of helplessness glimmered on their faces. Helplessness like someone with thirst to quench, in the middle of a desert: the desert of human anguish.

'How can our society allow this? For my father to vanish like the flame of a matchstick?'

'This is grab-bag independence, you know. The gold diggers receive soft strokes from the state.'

Tijan Sallah

'No matter for human blood spilled?'

'No matter. Human nature is like a prostitute here. It can sleep with whoever pays for the bed.'

The cook had been buried. The burial, a protest ritual. It could have happened to any private Kololian, it seemed. The oscillations of arrogance supported by the pillars with pearls could not match the angelic force of a people bent to assert their essence in the ceremonial catharsis of a society of hydra-headed leaders and gold-worshipping back scratchers. All works of life came, exuded their support, washed their grief in the festival of the affirmation of life.

Weeks after the burial, the younger Tamedou filed a suit against Fouad Aziz. The storms gathered their force as Fouad's father hired one of the best lawyers in Kololi to defend his son. The younger Tamedou had no money, and therefore was up for a scorpion fight. He had decided to fight for a New Earth and did not care about the repercussions. Hurricanes may strike, he thought to himself. Even hack the branches to which soothsayers cling. But the vision of the New Earth is more noble than the fears of the moment.

The trial was held at *Bul Falleh*² Courthouse. Bul Falleh used to be called *Borom Hallis*.³ But after independence, the Kololian officials changed the name, for reasons of not being too explicit about the hidden agenda of the court. The courthouse was packed like a sports stadium or a street *sabarr*.⁴ The walls of the court appeared garish, combining whitewash with peeling blue paint and suspended cobwebs. The buzz word for the ill appearance of the courts was 'austerity'. The judge sat behind a huge and brightly polished wooden structure. On his left was a witness box, in which the plaintiff and the defendant presented their cases. The court audience listened attentively and gave a loud applause when Fouad's defence lawyer bamboozled the judge in a fit of eloquent and persuasive argument, invoking specific passages from the Kololian constitution.

The accused denied his guilt, contending that the killing was an accident.

'But why would you point a weapon, of all things a gun that is loaded, at an innocent human being?'

'It was an accident, your honour.'

'An accident? Pointing a live weapon at a living person?'

'Yes, your honour. You know...'

'I know what? Answer my question!'

'You know... the gun is often locked in my father's safe. It was the late Koto Tamedou who unlocked it and let me have it.'

Dialogue
'He is lying!' the young Tamedou interrupted. Then he was hushed by the judge and admonished to order.

'Continue your testimony,' the judge commanded.

'Well, that's all I have to say, your honour.'

In the interim, Fouad's lawyer stood up and made a case for the latter's innocence.

correct
'Your honour, you can see from my client's testimony that there was no wilful intention to kill. My client was a victim of the late cook's negligence. By deliberately opening a regularly locked safe and releasing a loaded gun to this inexperienced young man, he wilfully assumed some risks. I contend that the young man be exonerated from the criminal accusations.'

There was silence in the court. The younger Tamedou stared fiercely into the eyes of the Aziz family. His heart pounded faster as he waited for the judge to return with a decision. The court audience was split in their loyalties. The half that sided with the younger Tamedou waited with bated breath for the spinning coin to turn in their favour. But they had not known about the plaintiff's father unlocking a safe. This point added ambiguity to a case that his admirers reasonably thought was a foregone conclusion.

The judge returned and declared Fouad acquitted. He praised Fouad for his conduct in the court, which he labelled with such adjectives as 'orderly and well-mannered' and 'somebody predisposed to exercise reasonable care'. Fouad's entourage of supporters stood up and hugged each other in a fit of merriment immediately as the judge finished his last word. The younger Tamedou received handshakes of encouragement from his supporters, some of whom stared bitterly at the grizzled moustache of Fouad's father. The younger Tamedou himself shifted his eyes around and flashed them on the dictatorial face of the judge. He swallowed his saliva in optimism and walked gracefully out of the courtroom.

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

♦ Revision questions

- well it is*
- 1 Why is the incident of the cook's murder compared to a film?
 - 2 Gold is referred to as 'god'. Why do you think the author does this?
 - 3 Authorial intrusion is _____. How is this shown in this story?
 - 4 How do the descriptions of the courthouse and the atmosphere in which the case will be held predict the outcome of the case?
 - 5 What do the following statements mean in the context of the story?
 - a) 'A two-legged one would suffice as game'.
 - b) 'He chose the path of sagacity'.
 - c) 'A plain cook so draped with sweet everydayness'.

Ken Saro-Wiwa

Africa kills her sun

KEN SARO-WIWA (1941–95) was a writer who held the world spotlight because of his execution by the Nigerian government on 10 November, 1995. He believed that to be a writer you have to be politically committed. 'Literature cannot be divorced from politics', he said before his death, aligning himself with a large number of serious African writers who pay the price for their uncompromising opposition to corruption and injustice. Saro-Wiwa's execution shocked the world and focused attention on his writing.

Saro-Wiwa was a popular journalist who wrote in local newspapers, wrote for children, performed poetry and participated in drama. *Sozaboy* (1985) was his most famous novel (republished in 1994 while he was in detention), yet he is probably best known for his scripting of the popular Nigerian television series *Basi and Co* (1985–90) which ran for 150 episodes. Saro-Wiwa was also a successful teacher, businessman and activist for the Ogoni cause in the Biafran War.

After his death, a collection of his works was published in 1996, *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary*. The story that follows is a satire on conditions of life in Nigeria, about a man who would rather die than live and be contaminated by his corrupt society. It is frighteningly prophetic, and parallels his own death.

Dear Zole,

You'll be surprised, no doubt, to receive this letter. But I couldn't leave your beautiful world without saying goodbye to you who are condemned to live in it. I know that some might consider my gesture somewhat pathetic, as my colleagues, Sazan and Jimba, do, our finest moments having been achieved two or three weeks ago. However, for me, this letter is a celebration, a final act of love, a quality which, in spite of my career,

in spite of tomorrow morning, I do possess in abundance, and cherish. For I've always treasured the many moments of pleasure we spent together in our youth when the world was new and fishes flew in golden ponds. In the love we then shared have I found happiness, a true resting place, a shelter from the many storms that have buffeted my brief life. Whenever I've been most alone, whenever I've been torn by conflict and pain, I've turned to that love for the resolution which has sustained and seen me through. This may surprise you, considering that this love was never consummated and that you may possibly have forgotten me, not having seen me these ten years gone. I still remember you, have always remembered you, and it's logical that on the night before tomorrow, I should write you to ask a small favour of you. But more important, the knowledge that I have unburdened myself to you will make tomorrow morning's event as pleasant and desirable to me as to the thousands of spectators who will witness it.

I know this will get to you because the prison guard's been heavily bribed to deliver it. He should rightly be with us before the firing squad tomorrow. But he's condemned, like most others, to live, to play out his assigned role in your hell of a world. I see him burning out his dull, uncomprehending life, doing his menial job for a pittance and a bribe for the next so many years. I pity his ignorance and cannot envy his complacency. Tomorrow morning, with this letter and our bribe in his pocket, he'll call us out, Sazan, Jimba and I. As usual, he'll have all our names mixed up: he always calls Sazan 'Sajim' and Jimba 'Samba'. But that won't matter. We'll obey him, and as we walk to our death, we'll laugh at his gaucherie, his plain stupidity. As we laughed at that other thief, the High Court Judge.

You must've seen that in the papers too. We saw it, thanks to our bribe-taking friend, the prison guard, who sent us a copy of the newspaper in which it was reported. Were it not in an unfeeling nation, among a people inured to evil and taking sadistic pleasure in the loss of life, some questions might have been asked. No doubt, many will ask the questions, but they will do it in the safety and comfort of their homes, over the interminable bottles of beer, uncomprehendingly watching their boring, cheap television programmes, the rejects of Europe and America, imported to fill their vacuity. They will salve their conscience with more bottles of beer, wash the answers down their gullets and pass questions, conscience and answer out as waste into their open sewers choking with concentrated filth and murk. And they will forget.

I bet, though, the High Court Judge himself will never forget. He must remember it the rest of his life. Because I watched him closely that first morning. And I can't describe the shock and disbelief which I saw registered on his face. His spectacles fell to his table and it was with difficulty he regained composure. It must have been the first time in all his experience that he found persons arraigned on a charge for

which the punishment upon conviction is death, entering a plea of guilty and demanding that they be sentenced and shot without further delay.

Sazan, Jimba and I had rehearsed it carefully. During the months we'd been remanded in prison custody while the prosecutors prepared their case, we'd agreed we weren't going to allow a long trial, or any possibility that they might impose differing sentences upon us: freeing one, sentencing another to life imprisonment and the third to death by firing squad.

(Nor did we want to give the lawyers in their funny black funeral robes an opportunity to clown around, making arguments for pleasure, engaging in worthless casuistry. No. We voted for death. After all, we were armed robbers, bandits. We knew it. We didn't want to give the law a chance to prove itself the proverbial ass. We were being honest to ourselves, to our vocation, to our country and to mankind.

'Sentence us to death immediately and send us before the firing squad without further delay,' we yelled in unison. The Judge, after he had recovered from his initial shock, asked us to be taken away that day, 'for disturbing my court'. I suppose he wanted to see if we'd sleep things over and change our plea. We didn't. When they brought us back the next day, we said the same things in louder voice. We said we had robbed and killed. We were guilty. Cool. The Judge was bound hand and foot and did what he had to. We'd forced him to be honest to his vocation, to the laws of the country and to the course of justice. It was no mean achievement. The court hall was stunned; our guards were utterly amazed as we walked out the court, smiling. 'Hardened criminals.' 'Bandits,' I heard them say as we trooped out of the court. One spectator actually spat at us as we walked into the waiting Black Maria!

And now that I've confessed to banditry, you'll ask why I did it. I'll answer that question by retelling the story of the young, beautiful prostitute I met in St Pauli in Hamburg when our ship berthed there years back. I've told my friends the story several times. I did ask her, after the event, why she was in that place. She replied that some girls chose to be secretaries in offices, others to be nurses. She had chosen prostitution as a career. Cool. I was struck by her candour. And she set me thinking. Was I in the Merchant Navy by choice or because it was the first job that presented itself to me when I left school? When we returned home, I skipped ship, thanks to the prostitute of St Pauli, and took a situation as a clerk in the Ministry of Defence.

It was there I came face-to-face with the open looting of the national treasury, the manner of which I cannot describe without arousing in myself the deepest, basest emotions. Everyone was busy at it and there was no one to complain to. Everyone to whom I complained said to me: 'If you can't beat them, join them.' I was not about to join anyone; I wanted to beat them and took it upon myself to wage a war against them. In no time they had *gotten*¹ rid of me. Dismissed me. I had no option but

to join them then. I had to make a choice. I became an armed robber, a bandit. It was my choice, my answer. And I don't regret it.

Did I know it was dangerous? Some girls are secretaries, others choose to be prostitutes. Some men choose to be soldiers and policemen, others doctors and lawyers; I chose to be a robber. Every occupation has its hazards. A taxi driver may meet his death on the road; a businessman may die in an air crash; a robber dies before a firing squad. It's no big deal. If you ask me, the death I've chosen is possibly more dramatic, more qualitative, more eloquent than dying in bed of a ruptured liver from overindulgence in alcohol. Yes? But robbery is antisocial, you say? A proven determination to break the law. I don't want to provide an alibi. But just you think of the many men and women who are busy breaking or bending the law in all coasts and climes. Look for a copy of *The Guardian* of 19 September. That is the edition in which our plea to the Judge was reported. You'll find there the story of the Government official who stole over seven million *naira*.² Seven million. *Cool*. He was antisocial, right? How many of his type do you know? And how many more go undetected? I say, if my avocation was antisocial, I'm in good company. And that company consists of Presidents of countries, transnational organisations, public servants high and low, men and women. The only difference is that while I'm prepared to pay the price for it all, the others are not. See? *N*

N I'm not asking for your understanding or sympathy. I need neither, not now nor hereafter. I'm saying it as it is. Right? *Cool*. I expect you'll say that armed robbery should be the special preserve of the scum of society. That no man of my education has any business being a bandit. To that I'll answer that it's about time well-endowed and well-trained people took to it. They'll bring to the profession a romantic quality, a proficiency which will ultimately conduce to the benefit of society. No, I'm not mad. Truly. Time was when the running and ruining of African nations was in the hands of half-literate politicians. Today, well-endowed and better-trained people have taken over the task. And look how well they're doing it. So that even upon that score, my conscience sleeps easy. Understand?

Talking about sleep, you should see Sazan and Jimba on the cold, hard prison floor, snoring away as if life itself depends on a good snore. It's impossible, seeing them this way, to believe that they'll be facing the firing squad tomorrow. They're men of courage. Worthy lieutenants. It's a pity their abilities will be lost to society forever, come tomorrow morning. Sazan would have made a good Army General any day, possibly a President of our country in the mould of Idi Amin or Bokassa. The Europeans and Americans would have found in him a useful ally in the progressive degradation of Africa. Jimba'd have made an excellent Inspector-General of Police, so versed is he in the ways of the Police! You know, of course, that Sazan is a dismissed Sergeant of our nation's proud army. And Jimba was once a Corporal in the Police Force. When we met, we had similar reasons for pooling our talents. And a great team we did

make. Now here we all are in the death cell of a maximum security prison and they snoring away the last hours of their lives on the cold, smelly floor. It's exhilarating to find them so disdainful of life. Their style is the stuff of which history is made. In another time and in another country, they'd be Sir Francis Drake, Cortés or Sir Walter Raleigh. They'd have made empires and earned national honours. But here, our life is one big disaster, an endless tragedy. Heroism is not in our star. We are millipedes crawling on the floor of a dank, wet forest. So Sazan and Jimba will die unsung. See?

One thing, though. We swore never to kill. And we never did. Indeed, we didn't take part in the particular 'operation' for which we were held, Sazan, Jimba and I. That operation would've gone quite well if the Superintendent of Police had fulfilled his part of the bargain. Because he was in it with us. The Police are involved in every single robbery that happens. They know the entire gang, the gangs. We'd not succeed if we didn't collaborate with them. Sazan, Jimba and I were the bosses. We didn't go out on 'operations'. The boys normally did. And they were out on that occasion. The Superintendent of Police was supposed to keep away the police escorts from the vehicle carrying workers' salaries that day. For some reason, he failed to do so. And the policeman shot at our boys. The boys responded and shot and killed him and the Security Company guards. The boys got the money all right. But the killing was contrary to our agreement with the Police. We had to pay. The Police won't stand for any of their men being killed. They took all the money from us and then they went after the boys. We said no. The boys had acted on orders. We volunteered to take their place. The Police took us in and made a lot of public noises about it. The boys, I know, will make their decisions later. I don't know what will happen to the Superintendent of Police. But he'll have to look to himself. So, if that is any comfort to you, you may rest in the knowledge that I spilt no blood. No, I wouldn't. Nor have I kept the loot. Somehow, whatever we took from people – the rich ones – always was shared by the gang, who were almost always on the bread line. Sazan, Jimba and I are not wealthy.

Many will therefore accuse us of recklessness, or of being careless with our lives. And well they might. I think I speak for my sleeping comrades when I say we went into our career because we didn't see any basic difference between what we were doing and what most others are doing throughout the land today. In every facet of our lives – in politics, in commerce and in the professions – robbery is the base line. And it's been so from time. In the early days, our forebears sold their kinsmen into slavery for minor items such as beads, mirrors, alcohol and tobacco. These days, the tune is the same, only the articles have changed into cars, transistor radios and bank accounts. Nothing else has changed, and nothing will change in the foreseeable future. But that's the problem of those of you who will live beyond tomorrow, Zole.

The cock crows now and I know dawn is about to break. I'm not speaking figuratively. In the cell here, the darkness is still all-pervasive, except for the flickering light of the candle by which I write. Sazan and Jimba remain fast asleep. So is the prison guard. He sleeps all night and is no trouble to us. We could, if we wanted, escape from here, so lax are the guards. But we consider that unnecessary, as what is going to happen later this morning is welcome relief from burdens too heavy to bear. It's the guard and you the living who are in prison, the ultimate prison from which you cannot escape because you do not know that you are incarcerated. Your happiness is the happiness of ignorance and your ignorance is it that keeps you in the prison, which is your life. As this night dissolves into day, Sazan, Jimba and I shall be free. Sazan and Jimba will have left nothing behind. I shall leave at least this letter, which, please, keep for posterity.

Zole, do I rant? Do I pour out myself to you in bitter tones? Do not lay it to the fact that I'm about to be shot by firing squad. On second thoughts, you could, you know. After all, seeing death so clearly before me might possibly have made me more perspicacious? And yet I've always seen these things clearly in my mind's eye. I never did speak about them, never discussed them. I preferred to let them weigh me down. See?

So, then, in a few hours we shall be called out. We shall clamber with others into the miserable lorry which they still call the Black Maria. Notice how everything miserable is associated with us. Black Sheep. Black Maria. Black Death. Black Leg. The Black Hole of Calcutta. The Black Maria will take us to the Beach or to the Stadium. I bet it will be the Stadium. I'd prefer the Beach. So at least to see the ocean once more. For I've still this fond regard for the sea which dates from my time in the Merchant Navy. I love its wide expanse, its anonymity, its strength, its unfathomable depth. And maybe after shooting us, they might decide to throw our bodies into the ocean. We'd then be eaten up by sharks which would in turn be caught by Japanese and Russian fishermen, be refrigerated, packaged in cartons and sold to Indian merchants and then for a handsome profit to our people. That way, I'd have helped keep people alive a bit longer. But they won't do us that favour. I'm sure they'll take us to the Stadium. To provide a true spectacle for the fun-loving unemployed. To keep them out of trouble. To keep them from thinking. To keep them laughing. And dancing.

We'll be there in the dirty clothes which we now wear. We've not had any of our things washed this past month. They will tie us to the stakes, as though that were necessary. For even if we were minded to escape, where'd we run to? I expect they'll also want to blindfold us. Sazan and Jimba have said they'll not allow themselves to be blindfolded. I agree with them. I should want to see my executors, stare the nozzles of their guns bravely in the face, see the open sky, the sun, daylight. See and hear my countrymen as they cheer us to our death. To liberation and freedom.

The Stadium will fill to capacity. And many will not find a place. They will climb trees and hang about the balconies of surrounding houses to get a clear view of us. To enjoy the free show. Cool.

And then the priest will come to us, either to pray or to ask if we have any last wishes. Sazan says he will ask for a cigarette. I'm sure they'll give it to him. I can see him puffing hard at it before the bullets cut him down. He says he's going to enjoy that cigarette more than anything he's had in life. Jimba says he'll maintain a sullen silence as a mark of his contempt. I'm going to yell at the priest. I will say, 'Go to hell, you hypocrite, fornicator and adulterer.' I will yell at the top of my voice in the hope that the spectators will hear me. How I wish there'd be a microphone that will reverberate through the Stadium, nay, through the country as a whole! Then the laugh would be on the priest and those who sent him!

The priest will pray for our souls. But it's not us he should be praying for. He should pray for the living, for those whose lives are a daily torment. Between his prayer and when the shots ring out, there will be dead silence. The silence of the graveyard. The transition between life and death. And it shall be seen that the distinction between them both is narrow as the neck of a calabash. The divide between us breathing like everyone else in the Stadium and us as meat for worms is, oh, so slim, it makes life a walking death! But I should be glad to be rid of the world, of a meaningless existence that grows more dreary by the day. I should miss Sazan and Jimba, though. It'll be a shame to see these elegant gentlemen cut down and destroyed. And I'll miss you, too, my dear girl. But that will be of no consequence to the spectators.

They will troop out of the Stadium, clamber down the trees and the balconies of the houses, as though they'd just returned from another football match. They will march to their ratholes on empty stomachs, with tales enough to fill a Saturday evening. Miserable wretches!

The men who shall have eased us out of life will then untie our bodies and dump them into a lorry and thence to some open general grave. That must be a most distasteful task. I'd not do it for a million dollars. Yet some miserable fellows will do it for a miserable salary at the end of the month. A salary which will not feed them and their families till the next payday. A salary which they will have to augment with a bribe, if they are to keep body and soul together. I say, I do feel sorry for them. See?

The newspapers will faithfully record the fact of our shooting. If they have space, they'll probably carry a photograph of us to garnish your breakfasts.

I remember once long ago reading in a newspaper of a man whose one request to the priest was that he be buried along with his walking stick - his faithful companion over the years. He was pictured slumping in death, devotedly clutching his beloved walking stick. True friendship, that. Well, Zole, if ever you see such a photograph of me, make a cutting. Give it to a sculptor and ask him to make a stone sculpture of me as I appear in the photograph. He must make as faithful a representation of

me as possible. I must be hard of feature and relentless in aspect. I have a small sum of money in the bank and have already instructed the bank to pay it to you for the purpose of the sculpture I have spoken about...

Time is running out, Zole. Sazan and Jimba are awake now. And they're surprised I haven't slept all night. Sazan says I ought at least to have done myself the favour of sound sleep on my last night on earth. I ask him if I'm not going to sleep soundly, eternally, in a few hours? This, I argue, should be our most wakeful night. Sazan doesn't appreciate that. Nor does Jimba. They stand up, yawn, stretch and rub their eyes. Then they sit down, crowding round me. They ask me to read out to them what I've written. I can't do that, I tell them. It's a love letter. And they burst out laughing. A love letter! And at the point of death! Sazan says I'm gone crazy. Jimba says he's sure I'm afraid of death and looks hard and long at me to justify his suspicion. I say I'm neither crazy nor afraid of death. I'm just telling my childhood girlfriend how I feel this special night. And sending her on an important errand. Jimba says I never told them I had a girlfriend. I reply that she was not important before this moment.

I haven't even seen her in ten years, I repeat. The really compelling need to write her is that on this very special night I have felt a need to be close to a living being, someone who can relate to others why we did what we did in and out of court.

Sazan says he agrees completely with me. He says he too would like to write his thoughts down. Do I have some paper to lend him? I say no. Besides, time is up. Day has dawned and I haven't even finished my letter. Do they mind leaving me to myself for a few minutes? I'd very much like to end the letter, envelope it and pass it on to the prison guard before he rouses himself fully from sleep and remembers to assume his official, harsh role.

They're nice chaps, are Jimba and Sazan. Sazan says to tell my girl not to bear any children because it's pointless bringing new life into the harsh life of her world. Jimba says to ask my girl to shed him a tear if she can so honour a complete stranger. They both chuckle and withdraw to a corner of the cell and I'm left alone to end my letter.

Now, I was telling you about my statue. My corpse will not be available to you. You will make a grave for me, nonetheless. And place the statue on the gravestone. And now I come to what I consider the most important part of this letter. My epitaph. *(writing funeral on the wall)*

I have thought a lot about it, you know. Really. What do you say about a robber shot in a stadium before a cheering crowd? That he was a good man who strayed? That he deserved his end? That he was a scallywag? A ragamuffin? A murderer whose punishment was not heavy enough? 'Here lies X, who was shot in public by firing squad for robbing a van and shooting the guards in broad daylight. He serves as an example to all thieves and would-be thieves!'

Who'd care for such an epitaph? They'd probably think it was a joke. No. That wouldn't carry. I'll settle for something different. Something

Africa kills her sun

plain and commonsensical. Or something truly cryptic and worthy of a man shot by choice in public by firing squad.

Not that I care. To die the way I'm going to die in the next hour or two is really nothing to worry about. I'm in excellent company. I should find myself recorded in the annals of our history. A history of violence, of murder, of disregard for life. Pleasure in inflicting pain – sadism. Is that the word for it? It's a world I should be pleased to leave. But not without an epitaph.

I recall, many years ago as a young child, reading in a newspaper of an African leader who stood on the grave of a dead lieutenant and through his tears said: 'Africa kills her sons.' I don't know what he meant by that, and though I've thought about it long enough, I've not been able to unravel the full mystery of those words. Now, today, this moment, they come flooding back to me. And I want to borrow from him. I'd like you to put this on my gravestone, as my epitaph: 'Africa Kills Her Sun.' A good epitaph, eh? Cryptic. Definite. A stroke of genius, I should say. I'm sure you'll agree with me. 'Africa Kills Her Sun!' That's why she'd been described as the Dark Continent? Yes?

So, now, dear girl, I'm done. My heart is light as the daylight which seeps stealthily into our dark cell. I hear the prison guard jangle his keys, put them into the keyhole. Soon he'll turn it and call us out. Our time is up. My time here expires and I must send you all my love. Goodbye.

Yours forever,

Bana

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

♦ Revision questions

- 1 According to the narrator, in what ways are the living more miserable than those who are about to die?
- 2 Why does the narrator keep referring to 'tomorrow'?
- 3 The narrator uses images like the sewer, black funeral robes, millipedes, etc. How do these help bring out the message of his story?
- 4 Why do you think the narrator uses the word 'cool' so often?
- 5 Write a report for a newspaper on the death of the three condemned men giving some background information on the criminals and the crimes they are supposed to have committed.
- 6 Discuss the characters of the narrator and his fellow convicts. In what ways does he differ from the others?
- 7 How did the prostitute in Hamburg influence the narrator's thinking?

Luis Bernardo Honwana

^{father} Papa, snake and I ^{story teller}

LUIS BERNARDO HONWANA grew up in a poor family near Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. His father was a translator for the Portuguese Colonial authorities, so he was introduced to writing early in life. At first he worked as a cartographer (map-maker), then as a journalist and newspaper editor in Beira, the sea port.

He wrote his first stories when he was seventeen years old, and published a collection called *Nos Matamos o Caotinhosa*, when he was only twenty-two years old. 'Papa, snake and I' comes from this collection. Because of his nationalist ideas, Honwana was imprisoned soon after the stories were published, but was released in 1967.

His stories were translated into English (*We Killed Mangy Dog and Other Stories*) and became popular world-wide because of their simple yet haunting style. Honwana captures a little boy's dreams as well as his powerlessness to change his world.

'Papa, snake and I' tells the story of a simple enough incident – the killing of a snake that threatens the household – yet this incident makes the child narrator realise that the world is not as it should be – oppression, discrimination and loss of dignity crash into his childhood world.

As soon as Papa left the table to read the newspaper in the sitting-room, I got up as well. I knew that Mama and the others would take a little longer, but I didn't feel like staying with them at all.

When I stood up, Mama looked at me and said, 'Come here, let me look at your eyes.'

I went towards her slowly, because when Mama calls us we never know whether she's cross or not. After she had lifted my lids with the index finger of her left hand to make a thorough examination, she looked down

at her plate and I stood waiting for her to send me away or to say something. She finished chewing, swallowed, and picked up the bone in her fingers to peep through the cavity, shutting one eye. Then she turned to me suddenly with a bewildered look on her face.

'Your eyes are bloodshot, you're weak and you've lost your appetite.'

The way she spoke made me feel obliged to say that none of this was my fault or else that I didn't do it on purpose. All the others looked on very curiously to see what was going to happen.

Mama peered down the middle of the bone again. Then she began to suck it, shutting her eyes, and only stopped for a moment to say, 'Tomorrow you're going to take a laxative.'

As soon as the others heard this, they began eating again very quickly and noisily. Mama didn't seem to have anything else to say, so I went out into the yard.

It was hot everywhere, and I could see no-one on the road. Over the back wall three oxen gazed at me. They must have come back from the water trough at the Administration and stayed to rest in the shade. Far away, over the oxen's horns, the grey tufts of the dusty thorn trees trembled like flames. Everything vibrated in the distance, and heat waves could even be seen rising from the stones in the road. Sartina was sitting on a straw mat in the shade of the house, eating her lunch. Chewing slowly, she looked around, and from time to time, with a careless gesture, she shooed away the fowls who came close to her hoping for crumbs. Even so, every now and then one of the bolder ones would jump on to the edge of the plate and run off with a lump of *mealie meal*¹ in its beak, only to be pursued by the others. In their wild dispute, the lump would become so broken up that in the end even the smallest chicken would get its bit to peck.

When she saw me coming near, Sartina pulled her *capulana*² down over her legs, and even then kept her hand spread out in front of her knees, firmly convinced that I wanted to peep at something. When I looked away she still didn't move her hand.

Toto came walking along slowly with his tongue hanging out, and went to the place where Sartina was sitting. He sniffed the plate from afar and turned away, taking himself off to the shade of the wall where he looked for a soft place to lie down. When he found one, he curled round with his nose almost on his tail, and only lay still when his stomach touched the ground. He gave a long yawn, and dropped his head between his paws. He wriggled a little, making sure that he was in the most comfortable position, then covered his ears with his paws.

When she had finished eating, Sartina looked at me insistently before removing her hand which covered the space between her knees, and only when she was sure I was not looking did she spring to her feet with a jump. The plate was so clean that it shone, but after darting a last suspicious glance at me, she took it to the trough. She moved languidly, swaying from the waist as her hips rose and fell under her *capulana*. She

bent over the trough, but the backs of her legs were exposed in this position, so she went to the other side for me not to see.

Mama appeared at the kitchen door, still holding the bone in her hand, and before calling Sartina to clear the table, she looked around to see if everything was in order. 'Don't forget to give Toto his food,' she said in *Ronga*.³

Sartina went inside, drying her hands on her *capulana*, and afterwards came out with a huge pile of plates. When she came out the second time she brought the tablecloth and shook it on the stairs. While the fowls were skirmishing for the crumbs, pecking and squawking at each other, she folded it in two, four, and eight, and then went back inside. When she came out again she brought the aluminium plate with Toto's food, and put it on the cement cover of the water meter. Toto didn't have to be called to eat and even before the plate was put down, he threw himself on his food. He burrowed into the pile of rice with his nose, searching for the bits of meat which he gulped up greedily as he found them. When no meat was left, he pushed the bones aside and ate some rice. The fowls were all around him, but they didn't dare to come nearer because they knew well what Toto was like when he was eating.

When he had swallowed the rice, Toto pretended he didn't want any more and went to sit in the shade of the sugar cane, waiting to see what the fowls would do. They came nervously towards his food, and risked a peck or two, very apprehensively. Toto watched this without making a single movement. Encouraged by the passivity of the dog, the fowls converged on the rice with great enthusiasm, creating an awful uproar. It was then that Toto threw himself on the heap, pawing wildly in all directions and growling like an angry lion. When the fowls disappeared, fleeing to all corners of the yard, Toto went back to the shade of the sugar cane, waiting for them to gather together again.



Before going to work Papa went to look at the chicken run with Mama. They both appeared at the kitchen door, Mama already wearing her apron and Papa with a toothpick in his mouth and his newspaper under his arm. When they passed me Papa was saying, 'It's impossible, it's impossible, things can't go on like this.'

I went after them, and when we entered the chicken run Mama turned to me as if she wanted to say something, but then she changed her mind and went towards the wire netting. There were all sorts of things piled up behind the chicken run: pipes left over from the building of the windmill on the farm, blocks which were bought when Papa was still thinking of making out-houses of cement, boxes, pieces of wood, and who knows what else. The fowls sometimes crept in amongst these things and laid their eggs where Mama couldn't reach them. On one side of the run lay a dead fowl, and Mama pointed to it and said, 'Now there's this one, and I

don't know how many others have just died from one day to the next. The chickens simply disappear, and the eggs too. I had this one left here for you to see. I'm tired of talking to you about this, and you still don't take any notice.'

'All right, all right, but what do you want me to do about it?'

'Listen, the fowls die suddenly, and the chickens disappear. No-one goes into the chicken run at night, and we've never heard any strange noise. You must find out what's killing the fowls and chickens.'

'What do you think it is?'

'The fowls are bitten and the chickens are eaten. It can only be the one thing you think it is – if there are any thoughts in your head.'

'All right, tomorrow I'll get the snake killed. It's Sunday, and it will be easy to get people to do it. Tomorrow.'

Papa was already going out of the chicken run when Mama said, now in Portuguese, 'But tomorrow without fail, because I don't want any of my children bitten by a snake.'

Papa had already disappeared behind the corner of the house on his way to work when Mama turned to me and said, 'Haven't you ever been taught that when your father and mother are talking you shouldn't stay and listen! My children aren't usually so bad mannered. Who do you take after?'

She turned on Santana, who was leaning against the wire netting and listening. 'What do you want? Did anyone call you? I'm talking to my son and it's none of your business.'

Santina couldn't have grasped all that because she didn't understand Portuguese very well, but she drew away from the netting, looking very embarrassed, and went to the trough again. Mama went on talking to me, 'If you think you'll fool me and take the gun to go hunting you're making a big mistake. Heaven help you if you try to do a thing like that! I'll tan your backside for you! And if you think you'll stay here in the chicken run you're also mistaken. I don't feel like putting up with any of your nonsense, d'you hear?'

Mama must have been very cross, because for the whole day I hadn't heard her laugh as she usually did. After talking to me she went out of the chicken run and I followed her. When she passed Santana, she asked her in Ronga, 'Is it very hot under your *capulana*? Who told you to come here and show your legs to everybody?'

Santina said nothing, walked round the trough and went on washing the plates, bending over the other side.

Mama went away and I went to sit where I had been before. When Santana saw me she turned on me resentfully, threw me a furious glance, and went round the trough again. She began to sing a monotonous song, one of those songs of hers that she sometimes spent the whole afternoon singing over and over again when she was angry.

Toto was bored with playing with the fowls, and had already finished eating his rice. He was sleeping again with his paws over his ears. Now and then he rolled himself in the dust and lay on his back with his legs folded in the air.

It was stiflingly hot, and I didn't know whether I'd go hunting as I usually did every Saturday, or if I'd go to the chicken run to see the snake.

Madunana came into the yard with a pile of firewood on his back, and went to put it away in the corner where Sartina was washing the plates. When she saw him, she stopped singing and tried to manage an awkward smile.

After looking all around, Madunana pinched Sartina's bottom, and she gave an embarrassed giggle and responded with a sonorous slap on his arm. The two of them laughed happily together without looking at each other.

Just then, Nandito, Joãozinho, Nelita and Gita ran out after a ball, and started kicking it around the yard with great enjoyment.

Mama came to the kitchen door, dressed up to go out. As soon as she appeared, Madunana bent down quickly to the ground, pretending to look for something, and Sartina bent over the trough.

'Sartina, see if you manage not to break any plates before you finish. Hurry up. You Madunana, leave Sartina alone and mind your own business. I don't want any of that nonsense here. If you carry on like this I'll tell the boss.'

'You, Ginho,' (now she spoke in Portuguese) 'Look after the house and remember you're not a child any more. Don't hit anybody and don't let the children go out of the yard. Tina and Lolota are inside clearing up - don't let them get up to mischief.'

'Sartina,' (in Ronga) 'When you've finished with that put the kettle on for the children's tea and tell Madunana to go and buy bread. Don't let the children finish the whole packet of butter.'

'Ginho,' (now in Portuguese) 'Look after everything - I'm coming back just now. I'm going along to Aunt Lucia's for a little chat.'

Mama straightened her dress and looked around to see if everything was in order, then went away.

Senhor Castro's dog, Wolf, was watching Toto from the street. As soon as he saw Wolf, Toto ran towards him and they started to bark at each other.

All the dogs of the village were frightened of Toto, and even the biggest of them ran away when he showed his temper. Toto was small, but he had long white hair which bristled up like a cat's when he was angry, and this is what must have terrified the other dogs.

Usually he kept away from them, preferring to entertain himself with the fowls - even bitches he only tolerated at certain times. For me he was a dog with a 'pedigree', or at least 'pedigree' could only mean the qualities he possessed. He had an air of authority, and the only person he feared was Mama, although she had never hit him. Just to take him off a

chair we had to call her because he snarled and showed his teeth even at Papa.

The two dogs were face to face, and Wolf had already started to retreat, full of fear. At this moment Dr Reis's dog, Kiss, passed by, and Toto started to bark at him too. Kiss fled at once, and Wolf pursued him, snapping at his hind-quarters, only leaving him when he was whining with pain. When Wolf came back to Toto they immediately made friends and began playing together.

Nandito came and sat down next to me, and told me, without my asking, that he was tired of playing ball.

'So why have you come here?'

'Don't you want me to?'

'I didn't say that.'

'Then I'll stay.'

'Stay if you like.'

I got up and he followed me. 'Where are you going? Are you going hunting?'

'No.'

'Well, then?'

'Stop pestering me. I don't like talking to kids.'

'You're also a kid. Mama still hits you.'

'Say that again and I'll bash your face in.'

'All right, I won't say it again.'

I went into the chicken run, and he came after me. The pipes were hot, and I had to move them with a cloth. The dust that rose was dense and suffocating.

'What are you looking for? Shall I help you?'

I began to move the blocks one by one and Nandito did the same. 'Get away!'

He went to the other end of the run and began to cry.

When I had removed the last block of the pile I saw the snake. It was a mamba, very dark in colour. When it realised it had been discovered it wound itself up more tightly and lifted its triangular head. Its eyes shone vigilantly and its black forked tongue quivered menacingly.

I drew back against the fence, then sat down on the ground.

'Don't cry, Nandito.'

'You're nasty. You don't want to play with me.'

'Don't cry any more. I'll play with you just now. Don't cry.'

We both sat quietly. The little head of the snake came slowly to rest on the topmost coil, and the rest of its body stopped trembling. But it continued to watch me attentively.

'Nandito, say something, talk to me.'

'What do you want me to say?'

'Anything you like.'

'I don't feel like saying anything.'

Nandito was still rubbing his eyes and feeling resentful towards me.

'Have you ever seen a snake? Do you like snakes? Are you scared of them? Answer me!'

'Where are the snakes?' Nandito jumped up in terror, and looked around.

'In the bush. Sit down and talk.'

'Aren't there any snakes here?'

'No. Talk. Talk to me about snakes.'

Nandito sat down very close to me.

'I'm very frightened of snakes. Mama says it's dangerous to go out in the bush because of them. When we're walking in the grass we can step on one by mistake and get bitten. When a snake bites us we die. Santana says that if a snake bites us and we don't want to die we must kill it, burn it till it's dry, then eat it. She says she's already eaten a snake, so she won't die even if she gets bitten.'

'Have you ever seen a snake?'

'Yes, in Chico's house. The servant killed it in the chicken run.'

'What was it like?'

'It was big and red, and it had a mouth like a frog.'

'Would you like to see a snake now?'

Nandito got up and leaned against me fearfully. 'Is there a snake in the chicken run? I'm scared - let's get out.'

'If you want to get out, go away. I didn't call you to come in here.'

'I'm frightened to go alone.'

'Then sit here until I feel like going out.'

The two of us stayed very quietly for a while.

Toto and Wolf were playing outside the fence. They were running from one post to another, going all the way round and starting again. At every post they raised a leg and urinated.

Then they came inside the chicken run and lay on their stomachs to rest. Wolf saw the snake immediately and began to bark. Toto barked as well, although he had his back turned towards it.

'Brother, are there always snakes in every chicken run?'

'No.'

'Is there one in here?'

'Yes.'

'Well then, why don't we go out. I'm scared!'

'Go out if you want to - go on!'

Wolf advanced towards the snake, barking more and more frenziedly. Toto turned his head, but still did not realise what was wrong.

Wolf's legs were trembling and he pawed the ground in anguish. Now and again he looked at me uncomprehendingly, unable to understand why I did not react to his hysterical alarm. His almost human eyes were filled with panic.

'Why is he barking like that?'

'Because he's seen the snake.'

The mamba was curled up in the hollow between some blocks, and it unwound its body to give itself the most solid support possible. Its head and the raised neck remained poised in the air, unaffected by the movement of the rest of its body. Its eyes shone like fires.

Wolf's appeals were now horribly piercing, and his hair was standing up around his neck.

Leaning against the fence, Tina and Lolota and Madunana looked on curiously.

'Why don't you kill the snake?' Nandito's voice was very tearful and he was clutching me around the neck.

'Because I don't feel like it.'

The distance between the snake and the dog was about five feet. However, the snake had inserted its tail in the angle formed between a block and the ground, and had raised its coils one by one, preparing for the strike. The triangular head drew back imperceptibly, and the base of the lifted neck came forward. Seeming to be aware of the proximity of his end, the dog began to bark even more frantically, without, however, trying to get away from the snake. From a little way behind, Toto, now on his feet as well, joined in the barking.

For a fraction of a second the neck of the snake curved while the head leaned back. Then, as if the tension of its pliant body had snapped a cord that fastened its head to the ground, it shot forward in a lightning movement impossible to follow. Although the dog had raised himself on his hind legs like a goat, the snake struck him full on the chest. Free of support, the tail of the snake whipped through the air, reverberating with the movement of the last coil.

Wolf fell on his back with a suppressed whine, pawing convulsively. The mamba abandoned him immediately, and with a spring disappeared between the pipes.

'A *nhoka!*'⁴ screamed Sartina.

Nandito threw me aside and ran out of the chicken run with a yell, collapsing into the arms of Madunana. As soon as he felt free of the snake, Wolf vanished in half a dozen leaps in the direction of Senhor Castro's house.

The children all started to cry without having understood what had happened. Sartina took Nandito to the house, carrying him in her arms. Only when the children disappeared behind Sartina did I call Madunana to help me kill the snake.

Madunana waited with a cloth held up high while I moved the pipes with the aid of a broomstick. As soon as the snake appeared Madunana threw the cloth over it, and I set to beating the heap with my stick.

When Papa came back from work Nandito had come round from the shock, and was weeping copiously. Mama, who had not yet been to see the snake, went with Papa to the chicken run. When I went there as well, I saw Papa turn the snake over on to its back with a stick.

'I don't like to think of what a snake like this could have done to one of my children.' Papa smiled. 'Or to anyone else. It was better this way. What hurts me is to think that these six feet of snake were attained at the expense of my chickens...'

At this point Senhor Castro's car drew up in front of our house. Papa walked up to him, and Mama went to talk to Sartina. I followed after Papa.

'Good afternoon, Senhor Castro...'

'Listen, Tchembene, I've just found out that my pointer is dead, and his chest's all swollen. My natives tell me that he came howling from your house before he died. I don't want any back-chat, and I'm just telling you – either you pay compensation or I'll make a complaint at the Administration. He was the best pointer I ever had.'

'I've just come back from work – I don't know anything...'

'I don't care a damn about that. Don't argue. Are you going to pay or aren't you?'

'But Senhor Castro...'

'Senhor Castro nothing. It's 700 *paus*.⁵ And it's better if the matter rests here.'

'As you like, Senhor Castro, but I don't have the money now...'

'We'll see about that later. I'll wait until the end of the month, and if you don't pay then there'll be a row.'

'Senhor Castro, we've known each other such a long time, and there's never...'

'Don't try that with me. I know what you all need – a bloody good hiding is the only thing...'

Senhor Castro climbed into his car and pulled away. Papa stayed watching while the car drove off. 'Son of a bitch...'

I went up to him and tugged at the sleeve of his coat.

'Papa, why didn't you say that to his face?'

He didn't answer.

We had hardly finished supper when Papa said, 'Mother, tell Sartina to clear the table quickly. My children, let us pray. To-day we are not going to read the Bible. We will simply pray.'

Papa talked in Ronga, and for this reason I regretted having asked him that question a while ago.

When Sartina finished clearing away the plates and folded the cloth, Papa began, '*Tatana, ha ku dumba hosi ya tilo misaba...*'⁶

When he finished, his eyes were red.

'Amen!'

'Amen!'

Mama got up, and asked, as if it meant nothing, 'But what did Senhor Castro want, after all?'

'It's nothing important.'

'All right, tell me about it in our room. I'll go and set out the children's things. You, Ginho, wake up early tomorrow and take a laxative...'

When they had all gone away, I asked Papa, 'Papa, why do you always pray when you are very angry?'

'Because He is the best counsellor.'

'And what counsel does He give you?'

'He gives me no counsel. He gives me strength to continue.'

'Papa, do you believe a lot in Him?'

Papa looked at me as if he were seeing me for the first time, and then exploded. 'My son, one must have a hope. When one comes to the end of a day, and one knows that tomorrow will be another day just like it, and that things will always be the same, we have got to find the strength to keep on smiling, and keep on saying, 'This is not important!' We ourselves have to allot our own reward for the heroism of every day. We have to establish a date for this reward, even if it's the day of our death! Even today you saw Senhor Castro humiliate me: this formed only part of today's portion, because there were many things that happened that you didn't see. No, my son, there must be a hope! It must exist! Even if all this only denies Him, He must exist!'

Papa stopped suddenly, and forced himself to smile. Then he added, 'Even a poor man has to have something. Even if it is only a hope! Even if it's a false hope!'

'Papa, I could have prevented the snake from biting Senhor Castro's dog...'

Papa looked at me with his eyes full of tenderness, and said under his breath, 'It doesn't matter. It's a good thing that he got bitten.'

Mama appeared at the door. 'Are you going to let the child go to sleep or not?'

I looked at Papa, and we remembered Senhor Castro and both of us burst out laughing. Mama didn't understand.

'Are you two going crazy?!'

'Yes, and it's about time we went crazy,' said Papa with a smile.

Papa was already on the way to his room, but I must have talked too loudly. Anyway, it was better that he heard, 'Papa, I sometimes... I don't really know... but for some time... I have been thinking that I didn't love you all. I'm sorry...'

Mama didn't understand what we had been saying, so she became angry. 'Stop all this, or else...'

'Do you know, my son,' Papa spoke ponderously, and gesticulated a lot before every word. 'The most difficult thing to bear is that feeling of complete emptiness... and one suffers very much... very, very, very much.'

One grows with so much bottled up inside, but afterwards it is difficult to scream, you know.'

'Papa, and when Senhor Castro comes?...'

Mama was going to object, but Papa clutched her shoulder firmly. 'It's nothing, Mother, but, you know, our son believes that people don't mount wild horses, and that they only make use of the hungry, docile ones. Yet when a horse goes wild it gets shot down, and it's all finished. But tame horses die every day. Every day, d'you hear? Day after day, after day – as long as they can stand on their feet.'

Mama looked at him with her eyes popping out.

'Do you know, Mother, I'm afraid to believe that this is true, but I also can't bring myself to tell him that it's a lie... He sees, even to-day he saw... I only wish for the strength to make sure that my children know how to recognise other things...'

Papa and Mama were already in their room, so I couldn't hear any more, but even from there Mama yelled, 'Tomorrow you'll take a laxative, that'll show you. I'm not like your father who lets himself get taken in...'

My bed was flooded in yellow moonlight, and it was pleasant to feel my naked skin quiver with its cold caress. For some unknown reason the warm sensation of Sartina's body flowed through my senses. I managed to cling to her almost physical presence for a few minutes, and I wanted to fall asleep with her so as not to dream of dogs and snakes.

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

♦ Revision questions

- 1 Name all the characters in this story. Who are they in relation to Ginho, the narrator?
- 2 a) Who do you think Sartina is and why does she behave so carefully towards the narrator?
b) What kind of relationship seems to exist between her and Madunana?
- 3 Comment on the descriptions of Toto, the narrator's family dog, Wolf, Senhor Castro's dog, and the snake. Why do you think the author describes each of the animals so vividly?
- 4 Describe the narrator's mother. What qualities make her a stronger character than her husband?
- 5 What does the author achieve by the use of the extensive dialogues?
- 6 Describe Senhor Castro. What kind of person does he represent?
- 7 How does the experience of killing the snake influence the narrator's (Ginho's) relationship with his father?
- 8 How old do you think the narrator is? Illustrate your answer from the story.

Nadine Gordimer

Amnesty

NADINE GORDIMER was born in South Africa in 1923 and grew up in a small town near Johannesburg. Since her first novel was published, she has been an active opponent of apartheid, using her talents to protest against discrimination and racism. Some of her writing was banned by the white government, and she herself was at one time not allowed to speak in public, yet she continued writing fearlessly. When the new ANC government won the elections in South Africa in 1992, she was personally invited by Nelson Mandela to speak at his inauguration, where she read from her work.

Gordimer has published more than ten novels, twelve collections of short stories, and numerous essays. She has also been awarded many prizes for her fiction, including the Booker Prize from England, the Malaparte prize from Italy, the Nelly Sachs Prize from Germany, the French international award, and the Nobel prize for literature. She is the second person in Africa to receive this important award, the first being Wole Soyinka from Nigeria. Nadine Gordimer still lives in South Africa, and continues to write novels and short stories about her country.

'Amnesty' was written in 1991 just before the end of apartheid, when the groups opposing the white government were unbanned, political prisoners were released (including Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu), and black political organisations began to prepare for the task of ruling the country.

When we heard he was released I ran all over the farm and through the fence to our people on the next farm to tell everybody. I only saw afterwards I'd torn my dress on the barbed wire, and there was a scratch, with blood, on my shoulder.

He went away from this place eight years ago, signed up to work in town with what they call a construction company – building glass walls up to the sky. For the first two years he came home for the weekend once a month and two weeks at Christmas; that was when he asked my father for me. And he began to pay. He and I thought that in three years he would have paid enough for us to get married. But then he started wearing that T-shirt, he told us he'd joined the union, he told us about the strike, how he was one of the men who went to talk to the bosses because some others had been laid off after the strike. He's always been good at talking, even in English – he was the best at the farm school, he used to read the newspaper the Indian wraps soap and sugar in when you buy at the store.

There was trouble at the hostel where he had a bed, and riots over paying rent in the townships and he told me – just me, not the old ones – that wherever people were fighting against the way we are treated they were doing it for all of us, on the farms as well as the towns, and the unions were with them, he was with them, making speeches, marching. The third year, we heard he was in prison. Instead of getting married. We didn't know where to find him, until he went on trial. The case was heard in a town far away. I couldn't go often to the court because by that time I had passed my Standard 8 and I was working in the farm school. Also my parents were short of money. Two of my brothers who had gone away to work in town didn't send home; I suppose they lived with girlfriends and had to buy things for them. My father and other brother work here for the Boer and the pay is very small, we have two goats, a few cows we're allowed to graze, and a patch of land where my mother can grow vegetables. No cash from that.

When I saw him in the court he looked beautiful in a blue suit with a striped shirt and brown tie. All the accused – his comrades, he said – were well dressed. The union bought the clothes so that the judge and the prosecutor would know they weren't dealing with stupid yes-baas black men who didn't know their rights. These things and everything else about the court and trial he explained to me when I was allowed to visit him in jail. Our little girl was born while the trial went on and when I brought the baby to court the first time to show him, his comrades hugged him and then hugged me across the barrier of the prisoners' dock and they had clubbed together to give me some money as a present for the baby. He chose the name for her, Inkululeko.

Then the trial was over and he got six years. He was sent to the Island. We all knew about the Island. Our leaders had been there so long. But I have never seen the sea except to colour it in blue at school, and I could not imagine a piece of earth surrounded by it. I could only think of a cake of dung, dropped by the cattle, floating in a pool of rainwater they'd crossed, the water showing the sky like a looking-glass, blue. I was ashamed only to think that. He had told me how the glass walls showed the pavement trees and the other buildings in the street and the colours

of the cars and the clouds as the crane lifted him on a platform higher and higher through the sky to work at the top of a building.

He was allowed one letter a month. It was my letter because his parents didn't know how to write. I used to go to them where they worked on another farm to ask what message they wanted to send. The mother always cried and put her hands on her head and said nothing, and the old man, who preached to us in the veld every Sunday, said tell my son we are praying, God will make everything all right for him. Once he wrote back, that's the trouble – our people on the farms, they're told God will decide what's good for them so that they won't find the force to do anything to change their lives.

After two years had passed, we – his parents and I – had saved up enough money to go to Cape Town to visit him. We went by train and slept on the floor at the station and asked the way, next day, to the ferry. People were kind; they all knew that if you wanted the ferry it was because you had somebody of yours on the Island.

And there it was – there was the sea. It was green and blue, climbing and falling, bursting white, all the way to the sky. A terrible wind was slapping it this way and that; it hid the Island, but people like us, also waiting for the ferry, pointed where the Island must be, far out in the sea that I never thought would be like it really was.

There were other boats, and ships as big as buildings that go to other places, all over the world, but the ferry is only for the Island, it doesn't go anywhere else in the world, only to the Island. So everybody waiting there was waiting for the Island, there could be no mistake we were not in the right place. We had sweets and biscuits, trousers and a warm coat for him (a woman standing with us said we wouldn't be allowed to give him the clothes) and I wasn't wearing, any more, the old beret pulled down over my head that farm girls wear, I had bought relaxer cream from the man who comes round the farms selling things out of a box on his bicycle, and my hair was combed up thick under a flowered scarf that didn't cover the gold-coloured rings in my ears. His mother had her blanket tied round her waist over her dress, a farm-woman, but I looked just as good as any of the other girls there. When the ferry was ready to take us, we stood all pressed together and quiet like the cattle waiting to be let through a gate. One man kept looking round with his chin moving up and down, he was counting, he must have been afraid there were too many to get on and he didn't want to be left behind. We all moved up to the policeman in charge and everyone ahead of us went on to the boat. But when our turn came and he put out his hand for something, I didn't know what.

We didn't have a permit. We didn't know that before you come to Cape Town, before you come to the ferry for the Island, you have to have a police permit to visit a prisoner on the Island. I tried to ask him nicely. The wind blew the voice out of my mouth.

We were turned away. We saw the ferry rock, bumping the landing where we stood, moving, lifted and dropped by all that water, getting

smaller and smaller until we didn't know if we were really seeing it or one of the birds that looked black, dipping up and down, out there.

The only good thing was one of the other people took the sweets and biscuits for him. He wrote and said he got them. But it wasn't a good letter. Of course not. He was cross with me; I should have found out, I should have known about the permit. He was right - I bought the train tickets, I asked where to go for the ferry, I should have known about the permit. I have passed Standard 8. There was an advice office to go to in town, the churches ran it, he wrote. But the farm is so far from town, we on the farms don't know about these things. It was as he said; our ignorance is the way we are kept down, this ignorance must go.

We took the train back and we never went to the Island - never saw him in the three more years he was there. Not once. We couldn't find the money for the train. His father died and I had to help his mother from my pay. For our people the worry is always money, I wrote. When will we ever have money? Then he sent such a good letter. That's what I'm on the Island for, far away from you, I'm here so that one day our people will have the things they need, land, food, the end of ignorance. There was something else - I could just read the word 'power' the prison had blacked out. All his letters were not just for me; the prison officer read them before I could.

He was coming home after only five years!

That's what it seemed to me, when I heard - the five years was suddenly disappeared - nothing! - there was no whole year still to wait. I showed my - our - little girl his photo again. That's your daddy, he's coming, you're going to see him. She told the other children at school, I've got a daddy, just as she showed off about the kid goat she had at home.

We wanted him to come at once, and at the same time we wanted time to prepare. His mother lived with one of his uncles; now that his father was dead there was no house of his father for him to take me to as soon as we married. If there had been time, my father would have cut poles, my mother and I would have baked bricks, cut thatch, and built a house for him and me and the child.

We were not sure what day he would arrive. We only heard on my radio his name and the names of some others who were released. Then at the Indian's store I noticed the newspaper, *The Nation*, written by black people, and on the front a picture of a lot of people dancing and waving - I saw at once it was at that ferry. Some men were being carried on other men's shoulders. I couldn't see which one was him. We were waiting. The ferry had brought him from the Island but we remembered Cape Town is a long way from us. Then he did come. On a Saturday, no school, so I was working with my mother, hoeing and weeding round the pumpkins and

mealies, my hair, that I meant to keep nice,* tied in an old *doek*.¹ A *combi*² came over the veld and his comrades had brought him. I wanted to run away and wash but he stood there stretching his legs, calling, hey! hey! with his comrades making a noise around him, and my mother started shrieking in the old style aie! aie! and my father was clapping and stamping towards him. He held his arms open to us, this big man in town clothes, polished shoes, and all the time while he hugged me I was holding my dirty hands, full of mud, away from him behind his back. His teeth hit me hard through his lips, he grabbed at my mother and she struggled to hold the child up to him. I thought we would all fall down! Then everyone was quiet. The child hid behind my mother. He picked her up but she turned her head away to her shoulder. He spoke to her gently but she wouldn't speak to him. She's nearly six years old! I told her not to be a baby. She said, That's not him.

The comrades all laughed, we laughed, she ran off and he said, She has to have time to get used to me.

He has put on weight, yes; a lot. You couldn't believe it. He used to be so thin his feet looked too big for him. I used to feel his bones but now – that night – when he lay on me he was so heavy, I didn't remember it was like that. Such a long time. It's strange to get stronger in prison; I thought he wouldn't have enough to eat and would come out weak. Everyone said, Look at him! – he's a man, now. He laughed and banged his fist on his chest, told them how the comrades exercised in their cells, he would run three miles a day, stepping up and down on one place on the floor of that small cell where he was kept. After we were together at night we used to whisper a long time but now I can feel he's thinking of some things I don't know and I can't worry him with talk. Also I don't know what to say. To ask him what it was like, five years shut away there; or to tell him something about school or about the child. What else has happened, here? Nothing. Just waiting. Sometimes in the daytime I do try to tell him what it was like for me, here at home on the farm, five years. He listens, he's interested, just like he's interested when people from the other farms come to visit and talk to him about little things that happened to them while he was away all that time on the Island. He smiles and nods, asks a couple of questions and then stands up and stretches. I see it's to show them it's enough, his mind is going back to something he was busy with before they came. And we farm people are very slow; we tell things slowly, he used to, too.

He hasn't signed on for another job. But he can't stay at home with us; we thought, after five years over there in the middle of that green and blue sea, so far, he would rest with us a little while. The *combi* or some car comes to fetch him and he says don't worry, I don't know what day I'll be back. At first I asked, what week, next week? He tried to explain to me: in the Movement it's not like it was in the union, where you do your work every day and after that you are busy with meetings; in the Movement you never know where you will have to go and what is going to come up

next. And the same with money. In the Movement, it's not like a job, with regular pay – I know that, he doesn't have to tell me – it's like it was going to the Island, you do it for all our people who suffer because we haven't got money, we haven't got land – look, he said, speaking of my parents', my home, the home that has been waiting for him, with his child: look at this place where the white man owns the ground and lets you squat in mud and tin huts here only as long as you work for him – *Baba*³ and your brother planting his crops and looking after his cattle, Mama cleaning his house and you in the school without even having the chance to train properly as a teacher. The farmer owns us, he says. I've been thinking we haven't got a home because there wasn't time to build a house before he came from the Island; but we haven't got a home at all. Now I've understood that.

I'm not stupid. When the comrades come to this place in the *combi* to talk to him here I don't go away with my mother after we've brought them tea or (if she's made it for the weekend) beer. They like her beer, they talk about our culture and there's one of them who makes a point of putting his arm around my mother, calling her the mama of all of them, the mama of Africa. Sometimes they please her very much by telling her how they used to sing on the Island and getting her to sing an old song we all know from our grandmothers. Then they join in with their strong voices. My father doesn't like this noise travelling across the veld; he's afraid that if the Boer finds out my man is a political, from the Island, and he's holding meetings on the Boer's land, he'll tell my father to go, and take his family with him. But my brother says if the Boer asks anything just tell him it's a prayer meeting. Then the singing is over; my mother knows she must go away into the house.

I stay, and listen. He forgets I'm there when he's talking and arguing about something I can see is important, more important than anything we could ever have to say to each other when we're alone. But now and then, when one of the other comrades is speaking I see him look at me for a moment the way I will look up at one of my favourite children in school to encourage the child to understand. The men don't speak to me and I don't speak. One of the things they talk about is organising the people on the farms – the workers, like my father and brother, and like his parents used to be. I learn what all these things are: minimum wage, limitation of working hours, the right to strike, annual leave, accident compensation, pensions, sick and even maternity leave. I am pregnant, at last I have another child inside me, but that's women's business. When they talk about the Big Man, the Old Men, I know who these are: our leaders are also back from prison. I told him about the child coming; he said, And this one belongs to a new country, he'll build the freedom we've fought for! I know he wants to get married but there's no time for that at present. There was hardly time for him to make the child. He comes to me just like he comes here to eat a meal or put on clean clothes. He picks up the little girl and swings her round and there! – it's

done, he's getting into the *combi*, he's already turning to his comrade that face of his that knows only what's inside his head, those eyes that move quickly as if he's chasing something you can't see. The little girl hasn't had time to get used to this man. But I know she'll be proud of him, one day!

How can you tell that to a child six years old? But I tell her about the Big Man and the Old Men, our leaders, so she'll know that her father was with them on the Island, this man is a great man, too.

On Saturday, no school and I plant and weed with my mother, she sings but I don't; I think. On Sunday there's no work, only prayer meetings out of the farmer's way under the trees, and beer drinks at the mud and tin huts where the farmers allow us to squat on their land. I go off on my own as I used to do when I was a child, making up games and talking to myself where no one would hear me or look for me. I sit on a warm stone in the late afternoon, high up, and the whole valley is a path between the hills, leading away from my feet. It's the Boer's farm but that's not true, it belongs to nobody. The cattle don't know that anyone says he owns it, the sheep – they are grey stones, and then they become a thick grey snake moving – don't know. Our huts and the old mulberry tree and the little brown mat of earth that my mother dug over yesterday, way down there, and way over there the clump of trees round chimneys and the shiny thing that is the TV mast of the farmhouse – they are nothing, on the back of this earth. It could twitch them away like a dog does a fly.

I am up with the clouds. The sun behind me is changing the colours of the sky and the clouds are changing themselves, slowly, slowly. Some are white, blowing themselves up like bubbles. Underneath is a bar of grey, not enough to make rain. It gets longer and darker while the other clouds are all pink, it grows a thin snout and long body and then the end of it is a tail. There's a huge grey rat moving across the sky, eating the sky; eating the sky.

The child remembered the photo; she said, That's not him. I'm sitting here where I came often when he was on the Island. I came to get away from the others, to wait by myself.

I'm watching the rat, it's losing itself, its shape, eating the sky, and I'm waiting. Waiting for him to come back.

Waiting. I'm waiting to come back home.

REVISION AND DISCUSSION

♦ Revision questions

- 1 Describe the kind of person the narrator is.
- 2 Pick out examples of sentences that are direct translations. Why do you think the author uses direct translations?